

SANITARIUM

Bringing you the best in horror fiction, dark verse and macabre entertainment.

Brian Rowe
DC Mallery
Christine Lajewski
Kathleen Wolak

Patrick Winters
Jesse Morrison
Christopher J. Ferguson
Craig Meinhart

CR Brooks
Justin Holliday

We Spend a Moment with:

Tales to Terrify
Flipping Zombies
A Classic Case of Lycanthropy

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Welcome to the Sanitarium

If this is your first visit or your 37th, we welcome you and we hope you enjoy your stay. We have great stories and featured to keep you entertained.

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Sanitarium Press

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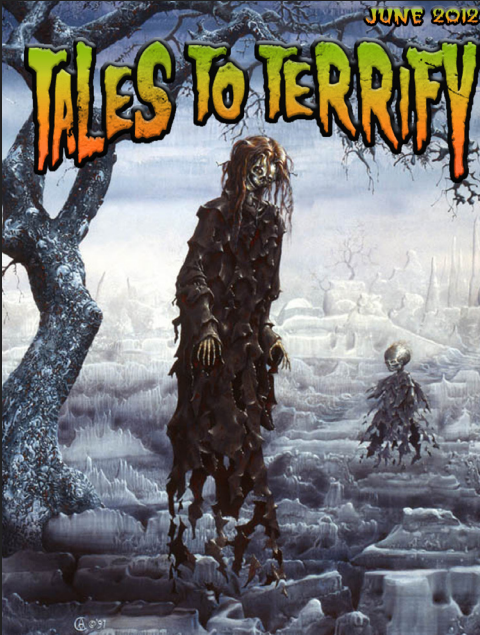
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100_

Tales to Terrify



103_

Flipping Zombies



105_

A Classic Case of Lycanthropy



ISSUE THIRTY SEVEN

Dear Reader,

I would like to begin, if I may, by saying thank you for picking up this issue of Sanitarium Magazine. This issue marks the 3rd year of publication, with over 400 stories published, countless reviews and interviews being showcased – we are truly in an interesting period for horror.

More and more indie filmmakers are making their mark and showcasing their talent to audiences across the globe. We are happy to report that we will be interviewing such filmmakers in upcoming issues – we start this month with sitting down with Alex and Nate from “A Case of Lycanthropy”.

So moving forward with will cover “Horror Entertainment” as a whole, whilst still bringing you new and exciting horror fiction and dark verse. We hope you enjoy the latest issue and the many more to come.

Barry Skelhorn
Editor-in-Chief



/Sanitariummagazine



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THE WICKED LIBRARY



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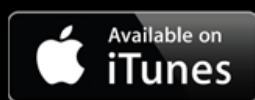
Starting this June, we'll be bringing a new dark tale to life every week with a dramatic reading that's sure to make you reach for the light switch.

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Creature Story

by Brian Rowe

Physician: Dr. Roundtree
8245-AVD12

#22103

CASE #: 22103



CREATURE STORY

BY BRIAN ROWE

THE RV APPEARED AROUND THE CORNER, a mere speck in the distance, the first vehicle to show itself in this part of the desert for nearly an hour. It was forty feet long, dark brown and archaic, and taking each sharp turn with an over-protective timidity that only a man in his early seventies could have the patience for.

Donald sat in the driver's seat, chewing his beef jerky with intentional slowness, as if the mere act of eating could numb his increasing boredom. He had tried to make conversation with his granddaughter earlier in the day, but had given up on that a long time ago.

His stomach growled. He grabbed for another strip of jerky, but the bag was empty. "Damn," he said.

Donald gazed in the rearview mirror. His granddaughter Grace sat at the little table across from the fridge. He saw her black-and-orange sweatshirt, her long blond curly hair that dangled past her shoulders. He couldn't see her face, though. Her face had been hidden for hours.

"Hey, are you hungry yet?" he asked, trying to speak up.

A few seconds passed. No response.

"Grace! Do you want some lunch?"

"What?" she finally said. "No, I'm okay now, Grandpa. Thanks."

He focused his eyes on the side of the road, which had a turnout ahead so wide it could have fit three RVs. He had heard his granddaughter loud and clear, but he also wasn't going to miss this opportunity to stop.

"You need to eat something," he said.

"I know, I know. But I'm not—"

"Grace, please. I'm not taking no for an answer."

He pulled off onto the dirt and put the RV in park.

Grace looked up from her notebook and glanced outside the nearest window. All she saw was gray sky. "Now where are we?" she whispered, more to herself than to her grandfather.

She peered at Donald's tired face as he stood up, with difficulty, and headed toward the tiny kitchen area. She could tell he was exhausted—he had been driving for four hours straight—and that he wouldn't be arguing with her unless he had a good reason to.

She shrugged her shoulders and brought her pencil back to the page. She wasn't going to stop until her story was finished.

Donald grabbed the white bread, strawberry jam, and chunky peanut butter and started making Grace a PB&J. He glanced back at her, watched her feverishly write across yet another lined notebook page for a few seconds, then stop. She remained still for a moment.

"So," he said, opening the jam jar, "what are you writing about?"

"Fiddlesticks!" she shouted.

"Huh?"

"Fiddlesticks. I've got to write this scene again." She started erasing sentences at the top of the page. She pressed the pencil so hard that halfway down, the eraser popped right off, and rolled back behind the table. She sighed, angrily, and crossed out the rest of the words.

"Fiddlesticks?" Donald dipped his knife into the peanut butter. "Why *fiddlesticks*?"

"You didn't like the other f-word I used yesterday," she said. "Remember?"

He laughed. He'd almost forgotten. "Oh. Right. I was a little shocked to hear that word come out of my grand—"

"Wait, I've got it!" Grace started writing again. Barely thirty seconds went by and she was already to the bottom of the page.

"Guess you figured it out," he said, cutting the finished sandwich in half. "Is this the one about the fairies from space who slaughter vampires?"

"No, no," she said, still keeping her head down. "This is another story about that monster who eats people."

He had to check his memory. Grace had written a lot of stories. "The one with the pink eyes?"

"Red eyes, Grandpa. Didn't you read my last one?"

"Yeah, I think so. *The Cold Deathly Morning* was the title, right? That was the one where the monster battles the zombies?"

"Yes, exactly."

Donald chuckled and said, "See, that story didn't make any sense to me. I mean, zombies eat people too, right? So what is there to fight about?"

He placed the sandwich and a few pretzels on a paper plate and brought it to the table. He set it next to Grace, but she immediately pushed it away.

"Grandpa, you don't get it." She put the pencil down as Donald took a seat across from her. "It takes a zombie, like, *hours* to eat a person. It takes my monster just five seconds to swallow a person whole. See the difference? The zombies made him mad. In the end, he killed every one of them."

"Wow," Donald said, placing his elbows on the table. He scratched the bottom of his goatee, the last of his facial hair that had yet to go gray. "You really like this monster character, don't you?"

She smiled and tapped her fingers on her notebook, like she was going to jump to her feet and start dancing. "Yeah, he's my favorite one to write about. He's so scary and smart. The best is when he swallows a person and

spits out their shoes. He doesn't like the shoes. Makes the feet taste bad."

He narrowed his eyes. "Grace, can I ask you a question?"

"I guess," she said with a shrug.

"What happened to the little girl who used to write about kingdoms and princesses? The love stories that always ended in a happily ever after?"

"Grandpa, I'm ten, not two."

"I know, I know. You're a big girl now, but... Everything you write now is so *gruesome*. Limbs being chopped off, monsters' heads exploding. I just don't want your parents to think I've been a bad influence on you. I know they don't let you write these scary stories."

She turned around, looked toward the doorway like she half expected her mom and dad to come waltzing in to take away her pencil.

"Listen," she said, bringing her attention back to Donald.

"What?"

"I won't tell if you won't tell."

"Yeah? Do I have your word on that?"

"Uh huh." She tapped her pencil against the table. "Now will you let me finish writing? Pleeeeease?"

He pushed himself up. "All right, all right. But not too much longer."

"Thanks, Grandpa."

Donald returned to the driver's seat and turned on the ignition. He looked in his side mirror, to make sure no cars were coming. Then he glanced in his rearview, to see Grace writing again. She was already turning to another blank page.

She stopped, just for a moment, and took a bite of the sandwich.

"Thank you, Grace," he whispered, quiet enough for her not to hear, and turned back onto the road.

A few hours later, after the sun had gone down and a thick haze had fallen over the chilly desert, Donald started yawning. He had been looking for an RV park to pull into for at least a half-hour, but there'd been none in sight, and this long stretch of nothingness never seemed to end. He finally turned into an empty rest stop parking lot and stopped the vehicle in the back.

He yawned again, and looked at Grace. She wasn't writing anymore. She wasn't doing much of anything. At first he thought she was asleep, but then he noticed she was sitting upright, noticeably shaking her head.

"Grace? Sweetheart?" He stood up and headed toward her. "Is everything all—"

"It's done," she interrupted.

"What?" He stopped beside her. Saw the licked-clean paper plate, then the bottom of the page, which said, in tall letters: THE END.

"My story's finished, Grandpa."

"That's... That's great, honey," he said. His eyes started watering, as he fought off another yawn. "I'm really proud of you."

"Thanks. Want to read it?" She handed the notebook to him, like she wasn't going to take no for an answer.

He pushed it back to the table. "I'll read it tomorrow. It's time for bed."

She pursed her lips for a second, but then nodded, set her pencil inside the notebook, and rose to her feet.

"Okay. I'll go get changed." She walked toward the bathroom, and stopped in front of the door. She peered back.

"Grandpa?"

"Yes?" He finished removing his thick cotton sweater.

"Can you..." She looked at the floor. "Do you think you might be able to tuck me in?"

He leaned against the table, and shot her a smile. "I'd love to."

Ten minutes later, Grace had changed from her sweatshirt and jeans to a long, white-and-purple nightgown, one that seemed to transform her back from the ten-year-old who wrote horror stories to the five-year-old Donald still saw every time he looked at her. She brushed her teeth and washed her face, then headed to the back.

"You didn't have to make my bed," she said, as she crawled toward the pillows.

Donald sat on the edge of the mattress. "It's not a big deal."

"I can take care of myself."

"Oh, I don't know about that."

She pulled the covers over her chest, trying to get comfortable. "What? I can. I'm gonna be in fifth grade next year, you know."

"That's still pretty young, *you know*."

"To you, yeah. You're old."

"Gee. Thanks."

Grace laughed and said, "Sorry. I didn't mean—"

"No, no. It's fine."

"Good." She pressed her lips together, then looked at Donald with a more serious stare. "What time are we meeting Mom and Dad tomorrow?"

"Dinnertime, probably. If I don't hit any traffic."

"Then you're finally rid of me?" she asked, melodramatically.

"Yep. That's the plan."

"Where do you go after that? I'm gonna see you again, right?"

Donald opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. He turned his head away.

"Grandpa?" she asked, sitting up. "What's wrong?"

He cleared his throat, then rested his hand on hers. "Nothing. I'm just gonna miss you."

"Aww, I'll miss you, too. It's been fun."

"Really? All this time, just you and your old grandpa in his banged up old motorhome—"

"It's been *fun*," she repeated. "Christmas vacation's been a tradition with you since I was, like, three years old. I wouldn't have wanted to be anywhere else this week."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

He took a deep breath and said, "I'm glad to hear that. It's been really nice having you around here."

She smiled at him, then stretched her arms toward the ceiling.

"Tired?" he asked.

"Yeah. I could sleep."

"Okay." He stood up and kissed her on the forehead. "Get some rest, Grace. We have a big day tomorrow."

"All right. Night, Grandpa."

"Sweet dreams."

He moved around her bed, turned off the light, and shut the sliding door. The only light in the RV now came from the front and he had to tiptoe most of the way forward as not to trip over anything. He reached toward the large cupboard beside the bathroom, which held the inflatable air mattress that he'd been using most of the trip, but he stopped his hands before they touched the knob; after nearly a day of driving, he just didn't have the energy.

Donald grabbed the pillow and yellow blanket from underneath the table and sat down in the driver's seat. He leaned his head back, rested his legs and feet up on the dashboard. A few seconds went by and he started to drift.

Tap, tap, tap.

He blinked and looked at the blinding light above him. He'd fallen asleep, for how long, he didn't know. It could have been a minute, an hour. It was still pitch black outside.

He could hear the sound of snoring emanating from the back. He chuckled and leaned his head against the pillow. He breathed through his nose and closed his eyes again.

Tap, tap, tap.

Donald's eyes shot back open. He looked at the window, where that weird noise was coming from. He could

see the full moon above, but nothing else. He shrugged.

"What the..." He threw the blanket off, pushed himself up a little, and stared out the window again, this time down and around.

A low growl emanated from outside. It sounded like an animal, something small, something low to the ground. He glanced his eyes down toward the dirt, but he couldn't see anything—just rocks and some bushes beyond the parking lot.

He pushed himself away from the chair and moved over to the kitchen area. He opened one drawer, then another. He finally found the flashlight. He went to click it on, when he saw it: the shadow on the front door.

Donald almost dropped the flashlight. He stayed perfectly still, as the room, as his blood, turned noticeably colder.

"Grandpa?"

Donald stumbled backward, his whole body so surprised by the unexpected voice behind him that he could have flailed any which way. He bashed his left hand against the food cabinet and hit the back of his head against the sink.

"Grandpa!" Grace shouted. "Oh my God, are you all right?"

"Ow," he said, shaking his hand in the air real fast as he found his footing. He sighed when he looked back at the door and saw no shadow at all. "It's... It's fine, Grace. You just scared me, that's all."

"Sorry. I heard a noise. It sounded like someone tapping on my window."

He dipped his head. "You mean... The tapping on the *front* window?"

"No. In the back. Next to my bed."

Donald glanced toward the bedroom. Didn't see a thing. "I'm sure it's nothing."

Tap, tap, tap. This time on the front door.

Donald turned to it. The shadow was back. It looked even bigger.

Tap, tap, tap. Tap, tap, tap, tap, tap.

"Grandpa, what is that?"

"I don't know." He gripped the flashlight. "Stay here."

Donald approached the door. He was the adult in this situation, the protector. But even as the shadow disappeared, even as the loud tapping stopped, he was trembling all the same. He yanked open the door and glanced outside, the cold wind striking him like unwelcome ice daggers. He shined the flashlight every which way.

"Hello? Who's out here?"

He waited. Ten seconds. Twenty. He started to turn around when a growl emanated from the front of the RV. This one was even deeper than the first. Donald crouched down and shined the light forward.

"Hello?"

The growl grew bigger, louder. It didn't sound like an animal anymore. It sounded happy and hungry, like a demonic laugh.

"Okay, I'm out of here," Donald said, and he charged back into the RV. He slammed the door and locked it tight, then threw the flashlight on the ground.

He leaned down and grabbed Grace by the shoulders. "I want you to listen to me."

"What?" She stared into his eyes.

"I want you to go back to bed. I want you to close the sliding door, and I want you to get under the covers. I'm gonna drive us somewhere else, okay?"

"Somewhere *else*? Did you forget, Grandpa? It's the middle of the night."

"I know, but I don't care. Just do as I say."

She crossed her arms in defiance. "What's the matter? Why are you acting all weird?"

"I'm not acting weird."

"Yes you are. You're acting *scared*." She smiled, sweetly, like there was nothing in the world to be frightened of. "Whatever it is outside, it won't hurt us. It can't get in here."

He glanced at the front door. The shadow was back. "Grace, please—"

"There's nothing to worry about, Grandpa, okay? Trust me."

The figure from outside released an earsplitting shriek and the windows on all sides of the RV shattered into a thousand pieces. Tiny bits of the glass struck Donald in the face and neck, as Grace screamed, clamped her hands over her head, and fell to her knees. Donald dropped to the floor and covered her body with his.

"Grandpa!" she screamed. "What is...? Oh my God—"

"Grace, stay down!"

Donald opened his mouth in terror as the RV started to tilt, the force of ten elephants slamming against the left side. The refrigerator door opened and a gallon of milk spilled onto the carpet, soaking the bottom of Grace's nightgown. An emergency aid kit fell from a cabinet above and landed next to Donald.

"Grandpa, make it stop! We're going to tip over!"

"We're not gonna tip over!" He turned toward the front, rested his right hand against the counter, and screamed, "Let us go, you *bastard*!"

As soon as he said the words, someone answered, as the RV came crashing back down to the ground, more glass shattering on top of Donald's bleeding head.

"Okay, we're okay," he said. "Come with me."

It wasn't a request this time; it was an order. He grabbed Grace's arm and pulled her toward the back of the RV. She turned around, only once, to see the entrance door ripped away from the vehicle.

"What's going on?" she asked, tears in her eyes, before Donald shoved her into the dark, miniscule bathroom.

"Grace, stay in here," he said, his voice loud and strong. "Don't make a sound, you hear me? Do not make a sound!"

"But Grandpa, what—"

He slammed the bathroom door shut, leaving her in the small space, in the blackness, alone. All she could do was listen.

"What in God's name?" Donald said, at the front of the RV.

Grace pressed her ear against the door. She heard a thud, then a groaning noise, then a high-pitched shriek.

"What are you?" he shouted. "What in the *world*—!"

His voice cut off, and all went silent.

Grace softly breathed in and out, sweat dripping down her face, her lips stained with fresh tears. She put her hand over her mouth, as the low growl returned, and the sounds of footsteps echoed through the RV.

She closed her eyes, shoved her back against the wall, silently prayed that whatever was out there wouldn't find her.

The footsteps came closer. Her breathing got heavier.

Then the growling stopped. The footsteps went away. Silence ensued. All Grace could hear was the wind coming through the shattered window behind her.

She put her ear back against the door. "Grandpa?" she whispered. "Are you there?"

More silence. She bit down on her bottom lip as she started opening the door. She peeked through the crack, toward the front of the RV. Nobody. Nothing.

"Grandpa?" she said again.

She opened the door a little more. A little more after that. She stepped out of the bathroom, into the thin hallway. The cold struck her from every side.

Grace moved forward, carefully stepping over the glass and the spilled milk. She set her hands on the walls beside her to keep her balanced, then the fridge, then the table.

She took another step forward, and her turquoise slippers didn't touch glass for once; they bumped into something softer, something that screamed comfort, not pain. She looked down. Donald's brown tennis shoes were sprawled on the ground, one pointed toward the open door, one tilted back and pointing right up at her. Both were stained with streaks of red that looked like paint. Tiny bubbles gurgled out from inside, splotches of mucous spilling onto the floor.

She gagged and put her hand to her mouth—then something growled behind her.

She twisted her head to the right, just far enough to see the outline of someone standing in her bedroom, in the dark. It could have been her grandfather. It could have been anyone. But then the figure moved toward her, stomping its feet hard against the ground, its legs seemingly taller than Grace herself. She saw the large ears first, pointing toward the ceiling and shaped like pterodactyl wings, and the white, gravelly face that looked made of flattened popcorn.

The figure stopped, and stared at her. A red glow fell over the room.

A tear trickled down her cheek. Her jaw dropped. Her whole body trembled, as she stared at the figure in front of her. The one she had only encountered in her worst nightmares.

She picked up her notebook. Looked at page one, then back at the figure. It was the monster—the creature of her imagination.

“It’s... It’s you,” she said.

The creature opened its mouth and charged toward her, its wide arms outstretched, its eyes so red they looked ready to explode into torrents of blood.

Grace screamed, and when the creature reached for her head, she dove to the floor and crawled under its legs, still with the notebook secured in her hands. The creature crashed against the driver’s seat and almost fell through the destroyed front windshield, as Grace returned to her feet and ran toward the exit.

The creature let out another piercing shriek and slammed one of its hands against her left shoulder, but it only hurt for a second. She jumped away from the RV with an impressive leap and sprinted into the desert night.

A critter cried from overhead and something slimy burrowed into the ground beside her, but Grace tried to stay focused on the run ahead of her, the cold air trying to slow her down, her slippers not helping when her feet kept striking the occasional sharp rock. She kept running, not looking back, even though she heard it coming—trudging toward her with a scary confidence, focused on the meal she had promised it, likely licking the blood off its lips with a hearty smile.

Grace ran for a minute, maybe two, but it felt like forever. She kept tripping over bushes, kept banging her knees against boulders. She maneuvered around a small tree, black and dead, but then her right foot struck a low branch and back to the ground she fell.

She smashed against the dirt with a painful thud but she didn’t come to a stop, like all the other times she fell—she barely had time to register the steep embankment before she started plummeting, faster with every second, her ribs colliding with rocks, her left leg twisting upward when it landed the wrong way. She kept tumbling down, no end in sight, then let out another scream when her body collapsed against ice.

She coughed into the cold, and then sat up, ignoring the pain, as she surveyed the new territory. The frozen lake she landed on had no visitors, nobody around to torment her.

Then the growl returned.

The creature appeared at the top of the embankment, its red eyes shooting down toward her like laser beams. Grace tried to stand up, but fell back down. She got up all the way a second time, but she had to hop on one leg. Three seconds of that and back to the ice she went.

She looked up again. The creature was coming toward her, descending the embankment in a dream-like glide, like a two-legged spider.

Grace rolled over and crawled forward on the ice, like she still had a chance.

“I’m not... Giving up...” she whispered.

She stopped and looked a few yards ahead, to the other side of the ice. Her notebook was open, turned to the last page of her story. The pencil was still in it.

“Oh my God,” she said.

Grace glanced back. The creature was almost to the bottom, a victorious smile plastered on its bloody face.

She slammed her hands against the ice and pushed herself forward, faster and faster. She reached for the notebook. Her fingers grazed its spine.

The creature jumped into the air and landed behind her, then pushed one of its legs against her back. Her chest struck the ice, as did her left cheek. Grace bit down on her tongue.

The tears formed again, as blood seeped into her mouth, but she reached out her hand, one more time, and snatched the notebook.

Grace twisted around and looked up at the creature, its legs moving slowly, methodically, like it didn't need to rush a thing. She grabbed the pencil. She remembered she didn't have the eraser any more, so she crossed out THE END on the last page and frantically wrote one more sentence below it. Her hands were so frozen she was barely able to make discernable letters but soon one letter became five, and one word became ten. The creature stopped a foot in front of her, leaned over, and opened its jaw again. She saw three layers of teeth, as its mouth aimed for the top of her head.

Grace glanced down at her notebook, one last time, and wrote THE END.

She looked up, all the way into the creature's back cavities. "Hey! Listen up!" She cleared her throat and yelled, "*Fiddlesticks!*"

It stared into her eyes, only for a second, and then the blood burst out of the creature's eye sockets, and the tongue dropped out of its mouth and licked Grace's face on the way down to the ice. The creature smashed its giant hands against its head and started shaking fast, too fast, and its brain popped through the top and shot over to the dirt, and its bird-like nose split into two, and the entire head exploded into gobs of white oatmeal mush. Grace covered her face as one of its ears bounced against her arm and landed beside her.

Everything went quiet as the rest of the creature's body slumped down onto the ice. Grace watched as the stomach started to open, down the center, from the bottom of the neck to the top of the belly button. Nothing happened for a moment, but then she saw the tiny fingers, the bulky arms, the little tuft of gray hair. Donald's body spilled out of the creature and slid onto the ice.

"Grandpa!" she shouted, pushing herself past the creature's carcass. "I don't believe it! It's you! It's really—"

She stopped, beside him. His cheeks were whiter than the creature's had been, and his eyes looked made of glass. He wasn't moving, wasn't breathing. He was gone.

"No," she said. "No, no. Wake up." Grace tugged against his arms, then pounded her fists against his back. "Grandpa, come on! Wake up!"

She turned around. Grabbed the notebook and flipped to the last page. Her added sentence read, THE CREATURE'S HEAD EXPLODES WHEN YOU SAY THE WORD, FIDDLESTICKS.

"Okay." She closed her eyes, then opened them again. "Let's do this. I can do this."

She crossed out THE END again, then added a new sentence, just three simple words: MY GRANDPA LIVES. She wrote the words in big letters at the bottom, then set the notebook down. She watched her grandfather, studied his eyes. Waited for him to blink, sit up, turn to her, and say, "Hi, sweetheart. What are you doing out here in the cold?"

She watched him for a full minute. He didn't move. She wrote in the notebook again. Wrote THE END again.

"Come on, come on," she said. She tapped the pencil against the ice and tried to think of something, anything. "Come on! Why won't it work?"

She glanced down at the notebook one more time. Looked at the sentence at the top, the one she had written hours ago: WHAT IT EATS STAYS DEAD FOREVER. Her eyes grew wide, as she smiled, and drove the pencil down to the page. She started crossing out the sentence, feverishly, as fast as she could, her eyes focused on her grandfather.

"I'm going to save you," she said. "I promise, I'm going to—"

The lead broke.

She stopped moving, stopped breathing, stared hard at the pencil. She brought it to her face and looked at the sad, broken stump.

"No," she said. "It can't..."

The pencil dropped from her hands and rolled down the ice, past the dead creature. She gazed at the notebook, only for a second, then closed it tight.

She returned to her grandfather's side and took a pained breath.

"Grandpa, I'm sorry," she said. "Please come back to me. I wrote it down. I wrote it, I promise. I wrote that you *live*."

She put her arms around him and sobbed against his chest, rocking him back and forth into the early morning hours.

The End.

CASE #22103

CREATURE STORY

BY BRIAN ROWE



Details not released at this time.



The Trauma Eater

by DC Mallery

Physician: Dr. Peterson
8268-WCT29

#69276

CASE #: 69276



THE TRAUMA EATER

BY DC MALLERY

Monday . . .

My wife had her auburn hair pulled tight in a bun. Her name might have been Anne. I'm not sure. She was about thirty, a few years younger than me. Our son was twelve. Arthur, I think. He'd gotten his best grades ever in school, so we were driving downtown to celebrate at a favorite pizza parlor. It began to rain hard, very hard, another wicked Midwest thunderstorm, the wipers struggling to keep up, fighting against the downpour, failing badly. My wife tried to say something that I couldn't hear.

But I never had a wife. I never had a son.

#

Tuesday . . .

She was a sun-drenched blonde this time, her hair tangled by the summer wind of our convertible. I think her name was Jocelyn. Our daughter was thirteen or so, tall for her age. I don't recall her name. We were heading home from a day at the lakeshore. The drunk was headed the other way, fast approaching stopped

traffic, oblivious. Too late, he tried to swerve. He struck the rear end of a VW hard. His massive sedan went airborne, careening up—but not quite over—our Olds Cutlass, shearing the windshield off, cutting my wife and daughter down like blades of grass.

Yet I had no wife. I had no daughter.

#

Wednesday . . .

She had short hair tucked under a knit cap, a few brown curls peeking out. Maybe her name was Amber. We had been arguing. The twins were in back, Terry and Teddy, eleven or so, rambunctious as always. This time the drunk ran a stop sign and sideswiped us on 3rd Street, sending our Olds into the nearby curb at just the wrong angle. We flipped over and were upside down as we plowed through the vacant storefront. The impact sheared the car roof off, clear down to the side doors, ripping the roof away like flimsy tin foil torn from a TV dinner.

But I *never* had a wife. There were no twins.

#

Thursday . . .

My wife was thin and nervous and she said something I didn't hear. The pale boy in the backseat was about ten or so, fidgeting. We were crossing the 10th Street Bridge and it was snowing now, wet snow, *slushy* snow. This time the drunk was driving a truck, overloaded with heavy machinery. He didn't hit us; he hit the bridge abutment. Then we struck him. Soon, we were sinking fast in icy water. Only I came out. But there was no truck. There was no bridge.

There was no wife. There was no family.

#

Friday . . .

The nightmares were *not* nightmares. They were memories, *impossible* memories. Nerves shot, I could no longer sleep. I could no longer dream. But those memories haunted me worse than any nightmare ever could. Here is a simple truth: voices that never were can never be silenced. On Friday, we weren't even in a car—my fake wife, my fake children, my *fake* family—we were in a seedy motel off the highway, on the second floor. Acrid smoke choked the room. Some vagrant had set the fire. I was the only one to get out.

No! No fire. No motel. No wife. No kids. Yet none of that *truth* mattered. The pain of it was real. The anguish. The heartbreak. The deep and crippling despair.

#

Saturday . . .

I had now taken enough speed to keep a bull elephant awake for a month and a day. I paced the apartment, bare feet creaking across the scratched hardwood floor. Sagging sweatpants and a sour T-shirt, neither changed for as long as I could remember. I kept up my relentless search, looking for anything that wasn't mine. Yet the drawers, the dressers, the closets, held only my clothes. My shoes. My belongings. No one else's. Just two rooms. The bedroom and the cramped main room with my desk squeezed alongside the kitchenette. A used Selectric typewriter, reference books, dictionary, thesaurus. I wrote my freelance articles there.

I hadn't written anything in *how long*?

No one seemed to mind. The phone never rang. The mail was all junk. Into the trash it went. Earlier, I found a wad of cash in a desk drawer. The landlord would come by sometime. I would crack the door open and push enough sagging bills through to make him go away. That hadn't happened yet, had it? I kept searching, my body begging now for rest, my mind ever more frantic. I checked the closets yet again, the drawers, opening and closing them until the runners grew hot. No honeymoon mementoes. No snapshots of kids. No holiday souvenirs. No nothing.

No family.

Now and then, I paused to stare at the man in the stained mirror above the toilet sink. Gaunt and pale, he looked a dozen years older than he should. I knew everything about that man. *Marshall Devon Adams*. Born in Chicago in 1940. Thirty-two years old now. I knew when he had his first smoke and his last, when he had

his first drink, when he lost his virginity. When he got drafted. When he got sent home from boot camp. 4-F. Childhood asthma.

I knew *everything* about that man.

He had no goddamned wife. There were no goddamned kids.

What the hell was happening to me?

In the dim and flickering light of the bathroom, with the drip, drip, *drip* of the sink loud in my ears, I spotted a glint of plastic in the dust and darkness behind the toilet. Hunkering down, my fingers found a yellow vial that must have rolled back there. A *goddamned* prescription vial. I hurried to the main room where the light was better to read the label.

Take one tablet as needed. Side effects include vertigo, nausea, excessive thirst, loss of appetite, loss of libido, confabulation, fraudulation, prevarication and various and sundry combinations thereof.

Below was the doctor's signature, hard to read. Ornate. I think it read: *The Trauma Eater*.

The Trauma Eater? I popped the vial open and peered inside. Empty. I smelled it. An odd lingering odor, medicinal. I stuck a finger in, licked it. Bitter. There was writing on the backside of the label. An address. 1717 1st Street. Just a half mile away. I checked the time and saw it was after midnight. If it was a proper medical office, I'd have to wait outside until morning. But if it were the sort of office found in the front room of an older residential house, maybe the doctor would be home. I'd pound the door. Wake him up. I'd find out what the *fuck* was going on.

Before I left the apartment, while searching for keys to let myself back in, I found a clean knife in the kitchenette. A paring knife. Short and sharp. It could come in handy.

Outside, it felt colder than it was, but my bones were close to the skin now, no thick warming layer of fat, so I kept moving. The neighborhood deteriorated badly after a block or so, cheap apartments giving way to tenements, then to abandoned commercial properties. Vagrants. Addicts. Pimps and whores. No one gave me a second look. A first look maybe. Never a *second* look. For that night I looked like the sort of guy you did not want to fuck with. I looked like the kind of man who would slit your throat before you had a chance to ask the time of day.

It wasn't raining, not yet anyway, but it would soon, so I quickened my pace. Sweat trickled along my neck, damp against my collar, my hair slick now. The address was no doctor's office, though. It wasn't an office at all. It was a bar. It was a *goddamned* bar. I must have been here before—I'd been to every joint in town—but I didn't remember this one. Maybe the name had changed. Now it was called *The Downtowner*. It had one of those script neon signs that buzzed and flickered. It didn't bother me that the doctor's "office" was a dive bar. Plenty of doctors didn't work out of offices. Yet they prescribed what was needed by folks like me who just weren't gonna sit still in some brightly lit waiting room, fat nurses padding in and out, soft Muzak piped in, goddamned National Geographics stacked on the end tables. In a dark bar, after midnight, you met the kind of doctor who had the shit you *needed*.

There was a surly bouncer at the door. As I pushed past him, he muttered that last call was in a half hour. I threw him a look. It was only 1:00 a.m. Last call should be at two, not a moment sooner. Inside, there were fake ferns and plenty of cheap mirrors and a row of dim and quiet booths. I slapped cash on the bar and called for a couple of whiskeys, straight. When the barman handed them to me, I told him to send "the doctor" on over, then slipped into one of the dark booths in the back to wait. I liked the privacy. Heavy partitions separated the booths. The upholstery was blood red, torn in places. Cigarette burns. Stains. Dried gum stuck under the table. I was just finishing my shot of whiskey when a man slid into the seat across from me.

I'm not sure what a doctor who called himself *The Trauma Eater* was supposed to look like, but this man probably fit. He was younger than me, his beard trimmed neatly, his dark hair plastered in place. Too much Brylcreem. His black suit might have been fashionable years ago, *decades* ago. Pale, he looked much like a mortician. And he had flint blue eyes. There was something unsettling about them. They were the sort of eyes

you couldn't look straight at for long. There seemed to be something watching from *behind* those eyes.

Looking at him, I recalled a short article I'd written a couple years back about the inner eyelids some animals have, so-called *nictitating* membranes. We all still had them, small and vestigial, hidden down in the corner of our eyes. In cold-blooded animals, they were often translucent. Reptiles could close those inner lids and still see. They could sit on a rock with their goddamned eyes closed and still *watch* you. Maybe it was just the whiskey, or the fact I hadn't slept one *goddamned* minute all week, but it occurred to me that maybe those flint blue eyes of his were just such a membrane, the real eyes hidden behind.

He didn't seem to recognize me at first. Then he looked closer, startled. "My goodness, Mr. Adams, you look awful."

"Of course I look awful. I haven't been *sleeping*. What the hell was in this?" I tossed the empty vial on the table.

He didn't bother to pick it up, nor even look at it. He grinned. "A sugar pill, Mr. Adams, with a dash of Angostura to give it a bitter taste, a *medicinal* taste. It helps with the metaphor."

"Metaphor?"

He palmed the vial like a magician, deftly slipping it into his suit pocket. "You didn't come here to talk about metaphors. I take it you've had some memory bleed. How bad?"

Memory bleed? "Well, if by that you mean I remember things that goddamned never happened, never *could* have happened, and it's driving me fuckshit crazy, then yeah, I guess I've had some *memory bleed*." I took his whiskey now because he hadn't touched it and gulped it down, felt the burn strafe my throat.

"Well, Mr. Adams, I already explained this to you." He sighed heavily, then leaned in close. "When you remove a memory, *any* memory, it leaves a space, a void. The bigger the memory, the bigger the void. But it gets filled in. Imagine shoveling mud from wet and sloppy ground. The hole won't last long. It gets filled in soon. And the things that shift and wriggle in to fill that void are not always pleasant things. So, too, with our most traumatic of memories."

Anger surged within me. "Is that what you did? You took my fucking memories? What the hell for?"

He gave a patronizing smile. "You paid me to, Mr. Adams."

"Bullshit! How come I can't . . . I meant to ask why I couldn't remember *any* of that but I realized the question would be pointless and stupid.

"If you recalled our earlier meeting, Mr. Adams, you'd remember me *taking* your memories. That would defeat the purpose."

"Yeah, yeah, I get it." My mind was finding traction now, catching up. "It was an accident of some sort? A car wreck?"

He shrugged. "I couldn't tell you. Once I've consumed a trauma, once I've *eaten* it, it's gone. Like yesterday's dinner." He dabbed a handkerchief to his mouth for emphasis.

Memories of our earlier meeting began shifting into focus, as if an inner eyelid were slowly opening deep within me. He told me how the mind would "confabulate" false memories to replace those taken away, but those new memories would be less painful. If your wife had died of cancer, *suffered horribly*, you might instead remember that she had divorced you, moved far away. That was less painful, right? And the *pill*? It was just a way of giving the Trauma Eater permission to do what he did. Swallowing that pill gave him the right to consume your most painful and private memories. Because that's what it *ate*. That's what it found nourishing. It. Him. Whoever, or *whatever*, was sitting across the table from me now. Grinning. Those goddamned flint blue eyes. The eyes that never seemed to blink.

He had warned me to get rid of anything that might bring the memories back. I had to do that *first*, before I swallowed the pill, otherwise it wouldn't work. I recalled, vaguely, throwing stuff out. A box of photographs. Polaroids from a brief honeymoon. A lock of a child's fine hair in a keepsake book. I couldn't remember *who* was in those photographs. I couldn't remember whose hair that had been. *Boy? Girl?* Maybe my mind was just "confabulating" now, but I vaguely recalled being married for several years. She must have left me. She took the kids. That's why none of her clothes were left in the flat, none of their toys.

No. We had a *house*. A craftsman with a little front porch. Maple trees in the yard. She'd thrown *me* out, my belongings dumped in sagging cardboard boxes, left on the curb in the rain. My typewriter. My books. Clothes. Shoes. So my bachelor flat never had much of anything to throw out. But was that really what I had so badly wanted to forget? That some bitch had divorced me? Maybe for another man. Maybe because I drank too goddamned much.

That didn't seem right.

I leaned into the doctor. "The memories you make up, the ones you *invent*, they're not as bad as the ones you want to forget, right?" I asked and he nodded. "So if I . . ."

Suddenly, I didn't want to tell him of the false memories my mind had concocted. *Horrific* memories. *Grotesque* memories. I didn't want him to know any of that. For if those tortured memories were truly less painful than what I'd chosen to forget . . .

He saw my anguish. "Bad, is it?"

"The worst part is that they keep shifting—the memories. They're never the same but each is *godawful* in its own way."

He looked worried. "That should have stopped by now. New memories settle in. They *congeal*. They become your own. They shouldn't keep shifting."

"Well they goddamned are!" I slapped the table.

Just then, the bartender came by. "Last call."

"Two more whiskeys. Doubles." I laid out a twenty, my last. The barman took the cash and retreated to fetch the drinks.

The Trauma Eater kept his voice low. "It's rare. But in some cases—when the invented memories are quite bad too—they leave their own void as they shift away. That, in turn, brings in more false memories. They keep cycling through. It's *quite* rare. But it can happen."

"I don't care how goddamned rare it is. What are you gonna do to put an end to it?" I felt under my jacket for the paring knife, warm now against the sweat of my body.

He gave a nervous smile. "It's quite simple. You'll need to eat someone else's memories, Mr. Adams. *Their* real memories will fill the void so *your* mind will stop concocting fake ones."

Eat someone else's memories? I wanted to grab the collar of his black suit and throttle him until those fucking blue eyes of his fell out, but the bartender returned with the drinks. I leaned back against the booth to cool down until he was gone.

Maybe it was not such a bad idea, I thought. If I could somehow stop my memories from changing every day, every hour, every *minute*, if they would just sit still, maybe I wouldn't go mad. "But how will we find someone who'd agree to that?"

"Mr. Adams, in this town, there's *always* someone looking to forget. *Desperate* to forget. I don't find them. They find me."

I nodded. "Okay. Now we're getting somewhere. But then what do I do? When you bring him to me, what do I do?"

The man reached into his coat and withdrew the vial. It now held one pill. Small and brown. He handed it to me. "Give him this. Tell him all the things I told you when we first met. Tell him to swallow it. When he does, your mind will eat a part of his mind. You will consume his trauma. Your shifting void of remembrance will be filled with something *stable*."

I guzzled one of the last whiskeys, felt the burn again along my throat. The bar would be closing soon. They'd send me into the rainy night. "You'll call me when you've found someone?"

The Trauma Eater cocked his head as though listening to unheard voices, as though tuning his ear to some ethereal radio. He grinned. "I have the perfect man. Tortured by guilt. His trauma will fit nicely into your void."

"Who the hell is it?" I asked, worried now.

"The drunk from your nightmares, Mr. Adams. The one who killed your wife and children. The one who got away with it because the cops couldn't prove it was him."

His blue eyes now shifted. Those outer eyelids began sliding away, revealing dark and haunted eyes beneath. His skin seemed to tighten. He became gaunt. Pale. Older.

I should have seen this coming.

Of course, I should have seen this coming. But you don't see these things when they're happening to you. You blind yourself. No amount of hindsight will change that. His patronizing grin faded, replaced now by a ragged and familiar leer. I didn't have to tell *that* man to take the pill. He grabbed the vial greedily, fumbled at it, popped the bitter tablet in his mouth, washed it down with the last of the whiskey.

When the bartender returned, I was still staring at the mirror on the far side of the booth. The barman said something about closing time. But I wasn't listening. I was remembering.

All of it now.

THE END

CASE #69276

THE TRAUMA EATER

BY DC MALLERY



DC Mallery is the author of four novels -- *Darksight Protocol*, *Cassia*, *Artemesia* and *Teleos* -- and several short stories. He is also an avid traveler. He has been ice-climbing in Alaska, bug-swatting in Greenland, and has been trapped in the innermost sanctum of the Great Pyramid of Giza when the power went out (inexplicably and for a distressingly long period of time).

Los Angeles is now his home.



Katy Did

by Christine Lajewski

Physician: Dr. Lotherton
8715-AED19

#85068

CASE #: 85068



KATY DID

BY CHRISTINE LAJEWSKI

THE SIGHT OF HER MADE ROBBY SICK. Unfortunately, he'd been placed in Braintree's alternative high school, where classes were limited to twelve students each. They were both juniors so Katy was almost impossible to avoid. She got Robby in trouble his first day back.

He could not fathom how the girl had even made it to adolescence. Katy had a spinal deformity so severe she looked like a reversed comma. She always dressed in loose black dresses and tunics over black leggings, which did nothing to lessen the impression. She would not use a wheelchair or crutches. She walked the halls with a tortured, crouching gait on bowed legs. Her arms were almost always bent at the elbows, her fists resting against her chest like a wedding guest waiting to launch into the chicken dance. She could relax her arms and use her hands but few people had seen it. She always skipped lunch, sipped water through a straw and used speech recognition software on her own laptop to write her assignments. Her speech was even worse than her looks—

raspy and vibrating like an insect was caught in her throat.

Repelled yet fascinated, Robby spent much of his first day in the alternative school sitting where he could see Katy or following close behind her in the halls. The other students, who knew his reputation, treated him like an outcast while they were tolerant, even friendly with the freak.

Before long, Robby was whispering things whenever he closed the distance between them--easy to do because she was so jerky and slow. "Are you a retard?" he hissed. "Do you know how ugly you are?"

Katy pretended she didn't hear him. Robby was determined to get a reaction. Just as the dismissal bell rang, he leaned in close and made a vulgar observation about what no one would ever want to do with her, assuming it was even physically possible.

At 7:30 the next morning, Robby found himself sitting with Mr. Driscoll, the director of the alternative program. Katy had said nothing but one of her friends (Katy had friends?) had overheard the last of Robby's comments.

Driscoll could have rehashed the bullshit accusation that got Robby excluded from school for most of his sophomore year: Supposedly, Robby had cornered a girl with Down's syndrome in the stairwell and said lewd things to her. The girl was timid but her friend, who was coming down the stairs, had plenty to say. Everyone believed her; no one believed him. The next thing he knew, Robby was being tutored in the library.

Driscoll didn't mention any of that. He sat silently at his desk, watching Robby, for several minutes. When Robby began to squirm, the director said, "You've been given a second chance to finish your education in this building. We can help you. That's what this program is for. But the headmaster won't give you another chance if you ruin this one. As long as you are here, you will treat teachers with respect. You will treat other students with respect. You won't post things on the internet about people you don't like. And you will leave this girl alone. Do you have any questions?"

Robby shook his head.

Mr. Driscoll sighed and said, "You have two days of in-school." He picked up the phone to tell Robby's mother what had happened.

Robby had plenty of time in ISS to think. He hoped his dad wouldn't hear about the latest trouble. His mom wouldn't tell if she thought she could get away with it. Robby's dad didn't hit much anymore; Robby was big enough to hit back. But he hated everything else his dad did when he got mad—the yelling, the sarcasm and the looks, like a fat toad staring down its lunch. Robby spent much of his time in ISS drawing the way he felt. He drew himself as a bug.

He watched Katy as she lurched up and down the hall outside the ISS room with her equally weird friends. She hung with a small group of kids who loved computer games, cosplay and anime. They took college classes online instead of AP classes in the mainstream and swapped stories about their anxiety attacks. But she rarely spoke except to Leon, her best friend. He was in the theatre guild and was constantly drawing in his sketchbook. He wore black tee shirts and skinny jeans and heavy, black-framed glasses he didn't need. He had this routine with Katy. She said something outrageous in a low voice. Robby couldn't hear the words, just the whirring hum of insect wings in her throat. Then Leon would howl with laughter and say, "Oh, Katy, you didn't."

"Oh, yeah, Katy did," she responded. Every time. Every fucking time.

He couldn't stand that voice. Robby heard it again and again over the length of his suspension. Near the end of his second day he finally identified what it resembled. He remembered lying awake on stifling summer nights, driven crazy by the scraping drone of green bugs on the window screens. A katydid—that was the sound. Oh, yeah, Katy did.

She's a bug, just like me, Robby thought and he immediately shook his head violently to clear his mind. He did not like the odd direction his imagination sometimes took when he was alone. The bell rang for lunch and, thankfully, his time in ISS was over.

The alternative program had a group meeting every day. This was where students talked about peer issues and asked each other for feedback and support to earn special privileges within the program. If someone did something wrong, they got hammered by the other students. After lunch, it was Robby's turn.

Katy wore just a hint of a smile as the student "leaders" lectured Robby about bullying, rehashed his past

mistakes and advised him about what he needed to do to be a success in the program. He even got the “I used to be a bully but look what I’ve done with my life” stories. He swallowed his anger, smiled back at Katy and plotted his revenge.

Leon could make bug jokes with Katy. Why couldn’t Robby do the same?

The following week, Katy did not show up for school. Then, on Thursday, Robby got to see Katy’s mother. He knew she was Katy’s mom because the woman looked exactly like her daughter, although she was much taller. She had the same, crouching, bow-legged walk, the same torsion in the arms and an identical curve in her spine. Even the voice was like Katy’s, only worse. When this woman spoke—when she breathed, for God’s sake-- it sounded like a bird was trapped and dying in her throat, frantically flailing its wings to get free.

She clutched Katy’s lap top in the crook of her elbow as she was escorted by the headmaster into Mr. Driscoll’s office. They were followed by the community police officer assigned to the school and the director of computer services. Robby knew the latter was there to help Mr. Driscoll get past the school’s fire wall and open up a fake Facebook page.

That was fine. Let them look at it. Robby hadn’t actually posted it; one of his friends had. It was no worse than the way Leon teased Katy. And the page was hilarious. Robby’s friend drove by Katy’s house and got a picture of her waiting for the short bus. They placed it on “Katy’s page” along with likes and hobbies a bug would have: living underground until maturity, babysitting maggots, masticating leaves and avoiding spider webs. Robby found a picture of a female praying mantis devouring her mate and wrote underneath, “After fucking my boyfriends, I like to bite their heads off.”

It was a long meeting. It ended just as the alternative students were passing to their next classes. Katy’s mom lurched out of Driscoll’s office and stared at Robby with glittering green eyes, as if he was some kind of insect. Robby collided with Leon, who gave him a sneer of contempt then smiled at Katy’s mom and nodded.

Robby had nothing to say when Driscoll and the headmaster questioned him. The police officer got permission from Robby’s mom to look at his phone and began scrolling through text messages and photos. She identified his friends and interviewed them. By the end of the day, Robby’s parents had been summoned to the headmaster’s office. Their son would finish his high school career in night school. His friend had a five-day suspension. Katy’s mom was pressing charges against both of them for cyber-bullying.

His dad chased Robby up to his room as soon as they got home. Robby was fast and strong enough but his father threw a belt around his son’s neck from behind and lifted him off his feet. Robby wanted to breathe so he allowed the old man to beat on him.

Robby was awakened that night by the thrumming of insect wings. It was November and much too cold for bugs. Even so, when Robby threw his window open, the rasping sound was as loud as a table saw. The pit of his stomach went cold. There was more than one creature out there: One making the initial buzz, a second one responding. They kept it up all night—and the next night and the next.

It continued intermittently over the next month. No one seemed to hear it but Robby.

One December night, as he walked home from class in a freezing rain, a car pulled alongside. The passenger window opened and Leon’s voice called out, “Need a ride?”

Robby shrugged and got in, grunting perfunctory gratitude. They passed a Dunkies and Leon nosed into the drive-through. “Want some coffee?” asked Leon.

Robby was almost too surprised to answer but said, “Extra cream, extra sugar. Thanks.”

When they reached Robby’s street, Leon pulled over. Robby opened the door but Leon said, “Just a sec.”

Robby looked at Leon and waited.

“Have you had enough?” asked Leon.

“Enough of what?” Robby asked.

“You know what. Have you had enough?”

“I’m on probation. What else does she want?”

“An apology. And reparations.”

“Reparations?”

"Like community service. Life isn't easy for her, you know. You could help."

"I didn't do anything and I don't owe anyone," said Robby as he got out of the car.

Robby woke up in the middle of the night and almost fell out of bed, jolted awake by an idea.

Katy was harassing him. Leon had all but said she was. Leon was part of it, too. There were at least two people making those noises. It occurred to Robby that if he was patient and smart, he could turn the tables and teach that little freak a lesson.

After a period of quiet that lasted through the holidays, the bug calls started up again. Robby got out of bed and dressed, crept to the back door and waited. The rasping sounded again from the back yard. He eased out the door and followed the noise. His phone was in his hand, ready to take the picture that would prove he was being bullied.

The sound moved to his neighbor's yard and Robby followed. He pursued it around the corner and down a dead-end street to a fence bordering the T station. Like every kid in town, he knew where to find the loose boards that provided access to the area around the tracks. He squeezed through the narrow opening and followed the rattling hum to a stand of trees alongside a lot for service vehicles.

Leon stepped out of the shadows to greet Robby. He was twirling one of those metal noisemakers people use on New Year's Eve. It was not what Robby had expected.

"You were making all that noise?" Robby exclaimed, taking a photo. "What's wrong with you?"

"Most of the time, it wasn't me," said Leon. "But I wanted to talk to you, so. . . ." He shrugged. "Look, we asked you before and we're going to ask you one more time."

"Ask me what?" *Who is we*, Robby wondered.

"Do you want to help Katy—to make up for the way you treated her."

"I never did anything to her."

Leon gave an exasperated sigh. "You know, I was an asshole just like you. Then I realized what a unique, beautiful person Katy is. She needs help getting around and getting things done. I've been assisting her for the past three years. But I'm graduating soon and going off to college. Someone's got to take over. We think you should do it. You owe it to her." The rasping noise had started up again in the stand of trees just over Leon's shoulder.

"I didn't do anything to her and I'm not doing anything for her. You know what you two are doing? You're stalking me."

"So your answer is no?" asked Katy as she slipped out of the trees. Every breath she took rattled in her throat, like something was trapped and dying in there.

Robby opened his mouth to make a retort but the words died on his tongue. She was much taller than he remembered. Her head bobbed delicately atop a long, slender neck, taking in all her surroundings at once. Her loose clothes fell away and Katy stepped towards him with smooth, long strides on two pairs of slender legs. The lights from the adjacent lot shone on scales of black and gray chitin covering her graceful, tapering body. Her arms, tortuously bent and clutching at her chest, relaxed and unfurled into the spiny, grasping appendages of a mantis. Her hands and flexing, functional fingers were actually attached to her elbows.

Leon was right. Katy was beautiful. Robby was mesmerized.

As she loomed over Robby she suddenly coughed. Her teeth flew out of her mouth, revealing horny, chewing mandibles. A wet mass that could have been either fur or feathers landed at Robby's feet. Something had actually died in her throat.

Robby turned to run but Katy grabbed him with her fore legs and lifted him off the ground.

"I don't actually fuck guys before I bite their heads off," she said, and she took Robby's head with one clean snap of her mandibles.

Leon grimaced and took a long walk while Katy methodically gnawed her prize from the stub of its neck down to its toes. By the time he smoked a cigarette and returned nothing was left but a few dollops of blood he easily scuffed away with snow and wet leaves.

"I was starving," said Katy, delicately nibbling blood from the spines on her front legs.

“Wow,” said Leon, inspecting the ground. “You even ate the clothes?” He laughed. “Katy, you didn’t.” A rattling chuckle sounded deep in her thorax as she replied, “Oh, yeah, Katy did.”

The End.

CASE #85068

KATY DID

BY CHRISTINE LAJEWSKI



Christine Lajewski is a recently retired alternative high school teacher. In her 34 years of teaching unhappy adolescents, she has learned a lot about the human capacity to self-sabotage, overcome adversity, choose cruelty or choose compassion. She has also been a haunt actor for the past 16 years. Her first novel, JHATOR, which explores how a woman overcomes grief when she learns to understand the language of animals, was published in 2014. She has recently completed BONEBELLY, a horror novel and is exploring publishing options. She has two adult children and lives with her garden, koi and dogs in Norton, Massachusetts



Guest

by Kathleen Wolak

Physician: Dr. Lichten
6428-SED41

#49184

CASE #: 49184



GUEST

BY KATHLEEN WOLAK

“Oh, Jessica—I forgot to tell you about the dream I had last night.”

Alice Davenport turned from her mirror to look at her companion. She laid down the brush she was using to tease her hair and ran over to the bed she and Jessica shared. She giggled before doing a belly flop on the twin bed, sending Jessica tumbling onto the floor.

“It was glorious... Oh, Jessica don’t be so silly,” Alice reached out to Jessica’s hand and pulled her back up, propping her on a mountain of pink pillows. “Anyway, we were running in this lovely flower garden. It wasn’t a normal garden, of course,” Alice laughed to herself. “It was massive—absolutely massive. The garden went on for miles.”

Alice stretched out on the bed, and smoothed out her pink satin dress. She looked up at her ceiling and smiled at the intertwined cobwebs.

“And then, when we fell to roll around in the flowers... They were frosting. We were rolling around in frosting flowers, Jessica!”

Alice turned on her stomach and stared at the one friend she had ever had in her twenty-nine years on earth. Jessica sat straight up, staring back blankly with her ceramic doll eyes.

“It was one of those silly dreams, you know.” Alice got up from her bed and went back over to her vanity.

She searched the lace-covered top for her favorite shade of lipstick—a bright hellfire red. She applied it over the cracked, existing layer that already adorned her lips and smiled at the pale, lightly lined face staring back at her.

“But I suppose that’s all dreams, isn’t it?” Alice tilted her head to examine the bright blue eye shadow that crumbled over her eyelids. She gathered her teased blonde curls into a high bun before letting them tumble down to her shoulders. Satisfied, she blew a kiss to her reflection and spun around, letting her short pink dress twirl. As she spun, she caught a glimpse of her frilly white underwear in the mirror and giggled aloud at the sight.

“You wanna know my dream, Jessica? My ‘wish-for dream?’” Alice skipped over to her bed and propped her doll up so she was facing her, giving the impression of someone listening intently.

“My dream is that mommy and daddy let me out of this house one day and I can just find someone to play with... All day. A friend, Jessica. Not that you’re not a perfectly fine friend, but someone who is a person, like me, and can skip rope and draw pictures and play board games.”

Alice sighed. “Yes, that would be the best dream. But mommy and daddy won’t be letting me out of the house anytime soon. I’ll be stuck in this room until I’m old and gray.”

Alice slapped her bare knee and shook off her bad feelings, replacing her frown with a manic, lipstick smeared smile.

“Well, enough gloom. Whadya say we play our favorite game?”

Alice snatched Jessica’s small, molded hand and skipped over to her window, which overlooked an expansive, overgrown backyard.

“Rapunzel, Rapunzel—let down your hair!” Alice sang and she shoved her doll’s head through the open window, letting her long synthetic hair hang.

She held her halfway through the window, and bellowed even louder, “Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair!” Jessica slipped through her hands, and landed on the grass three stories below with a soft thud.

“Oh no!” Alice leaned out the window and saw Jessica lying on her back, with her arms and legs pointing up as though reaching for her. Jessica’s face was cracked in two, and the left side lay open on the grass next to the rest of her.

“Oh no, no, no, no!” Alice stamped her saddle shoe on the floor, making dust dance around her frilly pink socks. Tears started to tumble down her face, cutting sharp trails through her makeup and fell, multi-colored on the floor.

“No, no, no!” Alice went back to the window to look once more at her only companion, now more lifeless than ever on the grass. As her tears fell like bombs on the lawn below, Alice saw something that put her off crying. The fence that separated the Davenport house from the sidewalk started to creak open.

Alice gasped. There hadn’t been visitors to the house in ages. Dr. and Mrs. Davenport were not very social, and usually spent all their free time in the study, away from people they considered beneath them.

As the gate opened a bit more, Alice saw that there was a little girl behind the door. A little girl with blonde hair just like her.

She went over to the doll lying in the overgrown grass and bent down, putting her hand on Jessica’s head to inspect the damage. Alice could barely contain her excitement.

“Yoo-hoo! Hello!” Alice waved a hand out in the girl’s direction. The little girl looked around before making eye contact with Alice. She stared for a moment, before waving back.

“That’s Jessica,” Alice called out. “Say, would you mind bringing her up here to me?”

“She’s broken,” the little girl called back. “And I’m not supposed to go in houses I don’t know.”

Alice thought fast. She didn’t want to lose the one opportunity for a friend that she had in years.

“Do you live around here?” Alice asked sweetly.

“Over in that red house.” The little girl pointed across the street. “I was playing in the yard and then I saw something fall over here.”

“Well then, we’re neighbors aren’t we? It’s okay if you come in here.”

Alice watched the girl work this out in her mind. Finally, she decided that perhaps Alice was right.

“Take the side door, it’s open and it leads directly up to my room here.” Alice closed the window and clapped

her hands excitedly. Finally, she would have a friend—someone to play with who wasn't made by a machine and had painted on eyes. All her sorrow about Jessica was fading away and being replaced by a happy warm feeling that was completely new.

There was a knock on Alice's bedroom door about thirty seconds later, and she bounded over like a puppy to answer. When she did, the little girl was standing there, holding Jessica like a baby.

"Well thanks!" Alice held out her arms and the little girl surrendered Jessica, along with the left piece of the doll's face.

"This is the weirdest house I've ever been in," the little girl said, looking at the high, drafty ceiling of Alice's room. Do you live here all by yourself?"

Alice tossed Jessica on her bed and put the broken face piece on her vanity.

"No, my parents live here too. They're probably in the study or library doing something boring. What's your name?"

"My name is Bailey, what's yours?" the little girl asked.

"Alice Julia Davenport. Say Bailey, would you like to play a game of checkers with me?"

Bailey looked around the room, and then back at the overjoyed woman smiling down at her.

"I guess that would be okay."

Alice clapped her hands and jumped up and down. Her tears were dry now, she had found a friend.

"Where's your checker set?" Bailey asked, looking around the drafty room.

"Under here!" Alice bent down and dragged an ancient checker board out from under her bed, along with a burlap sack full of checkers. She dumped them all out onto the floor and yelled "I call red! I'm always red."

"That's okay. I like black better anyway." Bailey collected the black pieces and started to set them up on her side of the board. "How old are you?" she asked Alice in that bold way that only small children could get away with.

"I am twenty-nine and three quarters. How old are you?" Alice asked back.

"I'm only six. I'll be seven in two months. My mama is twenty-nine." Bailey looked at Alice's tear-stained, overly caked-on face. "But she doesn't look like you."

Alice touched her face and looked down at her light pink skirt. "Oh, really? Is she pretty?"

"Yes. But I think you're pretty too."

"Really?" Alice's face broke into a wide smile. "You promise?"

Bailey nodded. "Yes. I like your hair."

The two new friends played five games of checkers in a row before Bailey noticed the sun starting to set.

"I better get on home. Mama gets worried if I've been out for too long."

"Are you sure? You can't stay any longer?"

Outside the closed window, across the street a woman's faint voice called out, "Bailey? Bailey!"

"That's my mama now." Bailey pointed towards the window. "You can come over for dinner though. Mama won't mind."

"Oh, no, I better stay here." Alice smoothed out her dress as she stood. "But you wanna come play tomorrow?"

"Sure, maybe." Bailey got up and dusted off her cut-off shorts. "Bye, Alice. It was nice to meet you." Bailey leaned over and hugged Alice around her middle. Alice, surprised but pleased, embraced Bailey tightly. "Bye Bailey. I can't wait to play again!"

When Bailey left Alice's room, Alice danced in place for a whole hour.

"A friend! A friend! I finally have a friend, Jessica! Mommy and daddy can't take that away from me—never, never, never!"

Alice could barely sleep that night, and when she woke up the next morning, she went right over to her window, hoping to see Bailey playing across the street. When Bailey wasn't in her yard in the morning, she decided to pass the time by putting on her face.

Alice sat in front of her mirror. She still had the hopeful feeling in her stomach that Bailey would come out after lunch, so she shook away her bad feelings and took to working on her makeup. She applied the heavy lipstick she always wore and dusted on her eye shadow before going back over to the window, where she sat and waited

until nightfall. When the sun finally went into the horizon, Alice gave up any hope she had of seeing Bailey. She had already started to cry, and her tears fell with giant *splats* into her lap, staining her pink dress blue.

"Why didn't she come today?" Alice asked Jessica, who still lay mutilated on her bed. Her one eye looked up at Alice almost pityingly.

Alice pushed Jessica off the bed and crawled in. The great amount of happiness she had felt yesterday was drained from her, and it even took more than it should have when it left. Now, she was doubly sad.

The next day Alice was awoken by the sound of children playing on the sidewalk outside the great fence. She rushed over to the window and opened it to see if any of them were Bailey. After a few minutes she spotted her playing jump rope with another young girl.

"Bailey!" Alice screeched out of her window. "Bailey it's me!"

Bailey glanced up at Alice but quickly put her head down. Alice watched in sorrow as Bailey whispered something to the other girl and they moved out of Alice's sight down the block.

"No! No, no, no!" Alice slammed her window shut and stomped around her room. "Why won't she be my friend anymore?" Alice threw herself on her bed and cried herself back to sleep. It wasn't until a rock hit her window many hours later that she stirred awake. Another rock came into contact with the glass, almost shattering it into a million pieces. Alice peeled her face from her pillow and opened the window to see Bailey standing in her yard.

"Bailey!" Alice exclaimed. All her sad feelings could go away now.

"I just came here to say I'm never to come here again!" Bailey shouted up at Alice.

"But-but why?" Alice asked, devastated.

"My mama said that you aren't real! She said that this is a bad house and that nobody lives here. She said that a long time ago a family lived here but the daughter went nuts and did something awful to her parents and then she died. She said nobody's been here since and I am not to come back either or she'll wallop me!"

With that, Bailey ran away across the street to her house. A few minutes later, Alice heard the faint slam of Bailey's front door.

"Well that's just silly isn't it, Jessica?" Alice picked Jessica up from her resting place beside her bed and smoothed out what was left of her hair. "I guess some people are just silly. It's okay, it's just a spooky old story."

Alice bent down by her bed and retrieved her checker board. Slowly, she set up all the pieces and stared at it for a moment before giggling to herself. "I like being red, Jessica." She said to her doll before sitting in front of her vanity.

As the weeks went by, Alice started to forget about Bailey. It wasn't until there was a tiny little knock on her bedroom door one sunny afternoon that she even remembered having a friend.

Alice opened her door and saw Bailey standing there, looking scared and sheepish. Her hands were in the pockets of her overalls and she was looking at the ground.

"Bailey! Hi! You wanna play a game or something?"

Bailey looked up at Alice's powdered face. "I just wanted to say I was sorry for saying those awful things to you. It's just that my mama made me talk to a doctor about being here and they both told me that you weren't real—but you're right here in front of me and you look pretty real to me."

Alice's smile sank quickly downward. "Well, then I guess they're wrong. Grownups are always wrong—especially stinky old doctors. What else did they tell you?"

"They said that like fifty years ago there were two parents that lived here and they had to keep their daughter in the attic because she was talking to people who weren't there and doing really bad things to the other kids in her school. They said that she was an awful little girl and then when she grew up she got even worse and they were gonna put her away but she didn't wanna be put away."

Bailey paused to take a breath.

"And then somehow she got a baby inside her and she was playing with the baby when it was born and she dropped it right outside the window of her room because she knew her parents were gonna take the baby away too."

"And that was when her mommy and daddy were gonna put her away forever but before they could she

made them go to heaven with a knife and then she went and jumped out her window. But I know that can't be anything to do with you because you're so nice and you're right here and that bad lady went to the bad place." Bailey looked around and lowered her voice to a whisper. "She went to *hell*."

Alice listened intently to Bailey's story. When she was finished, she took Jessica off her bed and looked at her broken face before giggling wildly.

"That was a really scary story. Say, Bailey, you wanna play my favorite game?"

Bailey nodded, relieved Alice wasn't cross with her.

"It's called Rapunzel." Alice took Bailey's hand and led her over to the window.

"It's a really simple game and a lot of fun. If you play it right, you'll want to play it every day forever and ever."

The End.

CASE #49184

GUEST

BY KATHLEEN WOLAK



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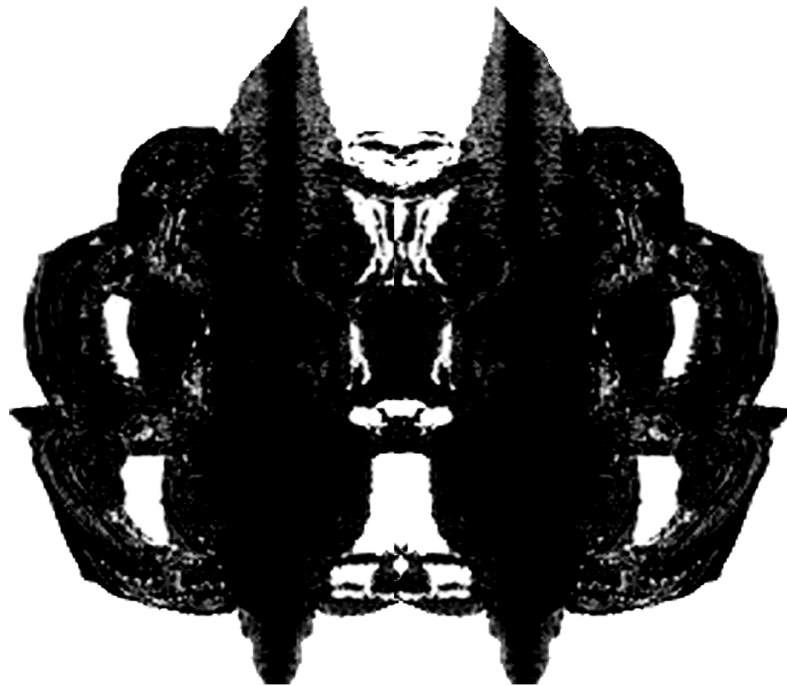
The Stranger

by Patrick Winters

Physician: Dr. Edgar
9828-SJE41

#11930

CASE #: 11930



THE STRANGER

BY PATRICK WINTERS

MATTHEW HOWARD RODE UP TO THE SALOON, the old nag beneath him hanging its head low and huffing and puffing into the dirt by its hooves. It could no doubt use a good drink of water and Howard knew he could do for some water himself, the kind with fire in it. He wished he'd bothered to bring more water or alcohol than he had before he'd left San Merida behind him. Healthy water sources turned out to be scarce around these parts, distilleries even more so. The Arizona winds and the dust kicking up from them had left him parched the last hour or so of his ride, scratching at his spirits just as much as his throat. The sorry excuse for a saloon before him might just have the right brand to whet his thirst and bring those spirits back into even-temper.

Though he had his doubts.

The Crooked Cactus, as the ramshackle looking establishment was so terribly named, seemed like the kind of joint whose firewater emphasized the water and fell short of the more wanted alcohol. If the owner couldn't

afford to give the place a suitable coat of paint (a dull, flaked red of wearing and age), fix the face of the building (the boards loose and hanging together only by God's good grace), or properly attach the sign (which hung limp by one thin chain over the doorway, the name written upon it and the symbol of a cactus drawn below that), then the booze he sold couldn't be worth whatever his asking price was. But in the desert, and with a long ride behind him and another still ahead, Howard would take what he could get.

With a groan he hauled himself over his horse, his spurs jangling and sending a puff of dust up as he jumped onto the bare earth of what passed for a street. The saloon was one of only a dozen or so buildings all clustered around each other, six on either side of a wide dirt path-- a brief road leading from nowhere into this so-called township, and out into nowhere again at the other end-- between the flanking establishments.

Howard gave a tug on his horse's reins, urging the dopey thing to move a bit faster. You move slower than Mariah, he thought, a cruel little smile spreading on his face. It fell away quickly though. That was another thing alcohol could help him with; forgetting memories and forgetting names.

A trough of water sat in front of the stoop leading into the Crooked Cactus, free of any other horses. If anyone else was in the saloon, they'd have had to come from within walking distance of the place. Howard knotted the reigns around the pole over the trough and turned away. His horse began to drink up the murky water as he took the steps up to the swinging doors of the saloon and sauntered inside.

"Quaint" was the polite word for such a place, "sparse" was a less reserved term, and "a shithole with a place to sit" was Howard's ideal choice of description. But as his sight fell on the shelves of drink behind the bartender, his criticisms slipped away.

The room was no bigger than a barn's space, nor did it smell much different. A thin layer of dirt seemed to swath over everything in sight, specks of it floating in the dim light shining in from the doorway and the few windows set into the face of the building. Off to the right were six tables, some circular in shape, some square, but none of them matching. The thriftiness of a small-time saloon owner on display. Only one of the tables was occupied, the middle one closest to the far right wall.

Three older gentlemen-- miners by the looks of them, either retired or barely hanging onto their profession-- sat facing each other, small glasses and a bottle of something or other between them. They didn't bother to look up at Howard as he entered; they were caught in some heated debate only kooky frontiersmen can rightly manage.

Off to the left, before the array of booze on display, was a bar no larger than ten feet long with five stools in front of it, only three of which were capable of holding a grown man's weight without snapping. The man tending the bar had the look of a curmudgeon: eyes permanently narrowed in either suspicion or anger, one side of his mouth upturned in a small scowl, and shoulders slumped in age-old, bitter resignation as he wiped his glasses clean. A mop of gray-white hair hung around his face and a thin mustache accentuated the look of disgust smacked on that haggard visage.

Howard stepped up to the bar, deciding whether to take a seat on one of the stools. He'd been sitting on his horse for hours though, and his ass hurt from the brisk pace he'd set his horse to taking. Standing would do him some good. Maybe if he ended up good and drunk he'd reconsider.

"G'morning," Howard muttered to the man at the bar. He figured he'd have to be the one to engage any conversation with the salty old man. "Whiskey, or whatever you've got that carries a punch."

The bartender gave him a good once-over, then turned back to the glasses he was so lethargically tending to. He eventually set one in front of Howard.

"Do you use that often?" The old man's voice didn't betray any worry, but his eyes blinked in a nervous flurry as he nodded at the six-shooter on Howard's hip.

"On occasion, yes."

"Well, if an 'occasion' should happen to follow you in here, take your business outside. Too many 'occasions' in the past have put holes in my tables, shot up my bottles of drink, and just barely scooted past my wrinkled ass." With the house rules set and noted, the bartender turned to the shelves behind him and grabbed hold of a bottle. He pulled the cork off with a pop, a sound that had brought a smile to Howard's face again and again

since he'd discovered the power of drink. "It's a sound that tickles a man's taste," he'd sometimes said when he asked Mariah for a glass of something strong at suppertime. Again, Howard's smile faded at the thought, but only a little; he was still getting his beloved drink, after all.

The old man slid the glass of whiskey towards him. Howard didn't speak an agreement as to the bartender's request, just let a brisk nod serve as an answer. He lifted the glass and downed the shot, barely taking the time to taste the drink before he smacked the glass down and nodded for another. The bartender grabbed hold of the bottle again and tipped more of the booze into the glass.

"...And he says to me, 'Martin, I swear to you, by my pa's name and God in Heaven, we started shooting up that coach and not one bullet did a bit of harm to it.'"

The words of one of the old men caught Howard's attention. He listened in on their ranting while he kept sipping his drink, staring down at the countertop while the man behind him continued.

"'Went right on through,' he says! 'He could see right through it,' he says! Like it was some mirage of sorts. But they could hear the wheels creaking and the carriage trembling as it raced on and away. He and his bunch couldn't make heads or tails out of it. He swears it was the Phantom Coach riding through, and he must have believed it-- scared him so bad he never went back to the gang again."

A round of harrumphs came from the other two men at the table. One of them spoke up when he figured his friend was finished.

"That story makes me mighty all-overish, Martin, swear it does. But 'aint nothing next to those stories I've been hearing coming from up south of here! Talks of some gravedigger character with an itchy trigger finger and a habit of not dying right."

"The hell you mean, Samuel, not dying right?" Martin-- the man who had spoken of the Phantom Coach-- asked. "I mean what I say! This character's been going all across the territories, shooting up all manner of men. I heard the ones he goes for don't go down without a fight, neither! All gunslingers and scoundrels, and by the sound of it each has put a shot into this bastard and he ain't died!"

"I heard the same," the third man at the table spoke up. "Heard from a cattle-driver headin' up north from Wyatt the other day talkin' 'bout it. He saw the man himself-- this gravedigger fella. Said he called out some desperado-type in the middle of the street, talkin' 'bout the people the other one supposedly killed. Rattled off quite a list o' names 'fore the desperado pulled out his Colt and put three into the other's gut. Didn't put him down, though. He kept a'comin', and 'fore anyone could do or say a thing, this gravedigger shot the desperado dead, quicker than a rattler. No one was inclined to stick around after that."

"What's with callin' him the gravedigger?" Martin asked.

"Gettin' to that. Well, a few people said they kept watch o' what happened after the scuffle-- from their houses and behind their curtains, mind you. Said they saw him drag the body of the desperado just outside of the town limits, grab a shovel from his pack-horse, and dig up a grave for him. Tossed him in, refilled the grave, and kept on goin', right out of town, no one botherin' to stop him."

"Shot three times and never died? Garsh," Martin said. "Awful odd story..."

"I heard similar stories," Samuel, the one who'd initiated this line of discussion about this ghoulish gravedigger, said. "All about a man, some gunslinger of sorts, popping up in all sorts of places and shooting up people. Bad people, by the sound of it. Killers and the like. People are saying he's some kind of ghost."

"Heard tell he's a demon of some sort," the one that wasn't Martin countered. "Somethin' Old Hob himself sent up from the fires o' hell. Took the shape o' a man to go around unnoticed-- 'lotta good that's done, by the talk of him. Collectin' up the souls of the damned and hell-bound for the devil. Apparently Old Hob can't wait for his black flock to come to his fiery fields in their own time."

Samuel persisted with his telling of events. "Well, I heard he's the spirit of some old bounty-hunter. Ruthless, he was, taking any bounty he could, no matter the price, big or small. Made his wages all over the west, collecting his share of posters town to town. Got himself cornered in a saloon one night when the brother of one of his bounties tracked him down. Shot him up something awful. Then he drug him out into the desert and buried him. But he didn't stay dead and buried. He got back up and has been chasing down more bounties ever since,

never stopping, unable to die, killing and burying the people he hunts until he collects enough money to buy his way into heaven or hell, whichever will take him.”

Any response or retort from the fellow’s bar buddies was stopped short by a loud, hard laugh by Howard. The three men at the table finally turned and saw him, each one frowning and the man who’d just spoken looking downright angry. Howard turned around to face them in kind, leaning his back and one elbow against the counter, his glass half-raised at his chest for an anticipatory sip. He smiled an impish grin at the older men before he spoke up.

“If this ghost-man of yours is killing to keep turning in bounties, why would he bury them? How does he get the money?”

The other two men’s looks of confusion deepened as they thought this over and looked at the one called Samuel, who’d grown upset, hunching his shoulders and looking down at the tabletop. Howard continued on in their silence.

“Besides, I never heard of any Devil or God that wants coin to allow a soul into their hell or heaven, well, other than what the preacher may say when he passes ‘round the plate come a Sunday.”

Another quick run of silence from the men came as they thought it over.

“He’s right,” one of the other two-- Martin, Howard suspected-- said. “Gotta show the bodies to collect rewards, ghost or not. Don’t make much sense, now does it?”

“Of course not,” Howard barked after drinking up and slamming the glass back down again. The bartender refilled as Howard retorted. “You’re talking of ghosts and spirits and all manner of horseshit that don’t exist. The only ‘other side’ I’ve ever concerned myself with is a river that needs crossing, and we ain’t got many in Arizona, do we? And you should do the same. Superstitions is for scared children and half-wit savages. And for crotchety old coots drinking in saloons, of course.” Howard gave a mock toast to the men as he downed another glass. He finished with a pleased sigh and continued, “but by all means, keep blathering if you’d like.”

Samuel, sitting closest to the wall and furthest from Howard, narrowed his eyes and clenched his fists in useless anger at the younger man’s haughty manner. He swallowed down whatever bitter words he wished to say and spoke in a measured, silent tone, just loud enough for all to hear. “You call it superstitious, boy, I call it knowing and respecting.”

That got another laugh out of Howard. He looked down at his boots, shaking his head, then turned his sight back to the old man. “Respect? For what, exactly, codger?”

Now all three of the men at the table were staring at Howard with that narrowed glare of judgment. Mocking beliefs was one thing, bringing up age or senility was another.

It was Samuel that continued on.

“For things we don’t rightly understand. That land out there and this life we live has strange ways about it. Things that we ‘codgers,’ with all our years and the sights we’ve seen, can’t explain away. And if we can’t, a young pup like you surely can’t either, in spite of all your thick-skulled ways.”

“Things you can’t understand?” Howard said, nearly spitting out the last word. “You’re just retelling stories others have heard from strangers, who were doubtless told those same stories by another person in turn.

Rumors! Besides, people get shot, killed, and buried every damn day out in these parts. We don’t need devils, ghosts, and dead men to do it. You’re putting nonsense in with hard facts. It’s people that kill people.”

Samuel managed a smirk at this. He held his head in a defiant and confident tilt. “Sounds like you know a bit about killing, stranger. Maybe this gravedigger will find his way to you soon enough. You may just be his type.”

The humid air of the saloon got a little bit warmer with that remark-- especially under Howard’s collar. He frowned and the old men must have seen it because all three were smirking now. The “codgers” had gotten to the youngster. If he weren’t holding his glass, Howard’s hand may well have shot to his hip for his iron. Three bullets to three faces ought to get rid of those mocking grins. Ought to prove that know-it-all Samuel right, too. But Howard stayed his fury and managed his proud tone back into his voice.

“Well, if your gravedigger does exist, let him come for me. Let him walk right in here and call me out on my so-called sins or what have you. I’ll take his shovel and shove it up his...”

The doors of the saloon opened and a man trudged in, breaking the heated conversation. He stopped in the mouth of the doorway, the slight ringing of his spurs and the thump of his heavy footsteps giving way to silence as the others looked towards him. The newcomer looked to be about Howard's age, surely no more than forty. He sported a long, dark brown coat that fell to his ankles, covering broad shoulders that were angled in a relaxed state. He wore a black hat, the kind with a flat top and a perfect circle of a brim. Under the hat was a face that some may call handsome, with pale skin for someone who had ridden in the Arizona sun, and a shadow of hair across his cheeks. Dark blonde hair with fine streaks of black sneaked their way out from under his hat, hanging down to the nape of his neck.

The bartender gave a nod to the man but said nothing. The man did the same. Then he looked towards the three older men at the table, then to Howard. Their eyes locked for a moment before the man moved to the bar. He stood there, staring at the wall before him while the bartender went to ask him what he wanted. He answered quietly, apparently asking for whiskey too, though neither Howard nor the other three could hear his exact words. The bartender set to getting the new arrival a drink.

Howard turned back to the old coots at their table. "As I was saying," he continued, though he didn't pick up exactly where he'd left off, "I don't put stock in your ghost stories and your hearsay. Nothing you say, no tales you could spin, will change my mind. And if I should know anything of killing..." Howard paused for effect, noting the weight of the Colt at his side, "well you're better off not knowing."

"Who would know?"

Howard had started to turn back to the bar, his say spoken and his attention shifting from the men, when the deep voice stopped him.

It was the newcomer who'd spoken.

Howard stared at him, speechless for a moment. The other man at the bar kept staring at the wall, taking a drink, and saying nothing more.

"Excuse me?" Howard set his little glass down on the counter, angling himself to face the other man. The weight on his hip found an extra pound or so. His fingers tapped lightly on the edge of the counter, a foot away from the grip of his revolver. The air grew warmer again, his skin flushing red. He sensed the other patrons' eyes shifting from him to the newcomer, anxious. "You say something, stranger?"

The man set his own glass down, but he didn't bother to turn and face Howard. Just kept staring at the peeling paint of the wall.

Seconds slipped by quietly.

"Who would know," he repeated in the same blank, deep tone, "about whether or not you could kill? A hunting buddy? An old war compatriot?" He paused. "Your wife, perhaps?"

Howard's fingers stopped their brisk tapping. "Ain't got a wife," he answered.

The man didn't skip a beat with his next words. "No. Not anymore... You saw to that."

Howard's throat was suddenly dry despite the aftertaste of whiskey on his tongue. He didn't care for this man and his voice. Managing up some spittle and clearing his throat, Howard asked "Do I know you, mister?"

"No," the man said, "you don't. And I don't know you. But I know about you."

Howard remembered the bartender's words. If an 'occasion' should happen to follow you in here, take your business outside. He felt an occasion brewing, but whether or not it made it outside was yet to be seen.

"I know you left San Merida two days ago. Got out in a hurry. Took only essentials with you. I know you've been riding hard ever since. Probably pushing your horse close to death. I know you shot and killed your wife."

"Mister, you..."

"Mariah."

Speaking that name cut Howard's denial short. The man knew! How could he know?

"That was her name. Mariah."

Howard could feel the eyes of the codgers and the bartender latch onto him. His hand slid a fraction closer to his hip. He didn't say anything, but the man kept on speaking.

"I don't know why you did it-- just that you did. Maybe she messed up a meal. Maybe she had an idea and you

didn't like it. Maybe you just felt like doing something mean after you downed a few glasses."

The man finally turned his head around and looked straight at Howard. Eyes that looked yellowish in the light shone with damning judgment.

"And I'm thinking maybe I ought to do something about it."

Howard swallowed hard again, taking a small step forward, like a wildcat does when it's cornered by hunters-- the daring bluff of a scared killer. He glanced down at the waist of the man, looking for the telltale bulge of a holster at the man's side. If there were a gun on the man, Howard couldn't tell by how the dark brown coat fell about the man's frame. "You some kind of lawman?"

A slight nod from the other man.

"Some kind."

Another moment of silence, another bout of stillness. It was the bartender who broke it.

"Now," he began, inching his back against the wall, ready to dive out of sight should the need arise, "if you two fellars have some issue needs resolving, go outside and do it."

The other man gave Howard a look that asked, what'll it be?

Howard gritted his teeth, his heart thudding away with the promise of violence, the alcohol pulsing through his veins making him all the more eager to put this mystery man down with a bullet. Howard nodded to the door, moving slowly towards it and keeping his eyes on the stranger. A cunning little grin slipped over his features, a show of bravado. Lawman or not, this sad sack was going to get killed for his troubles and his words. Howard had a plan.

The other man turned and made his way to the doors, walking slowly, but not cautiously. Practically strolling and carefree. His back was to Howard, and his head was turned completely away from the man he'd just called out for murder. Howard could hear the legs of chairs screeching against the planks of the floor-- the three old men were getting up, no doubt coming over to watch the sporadic and exciting event from the mouth of the doorway or, better and safer yet, from the windows. Duels in a lonesome place like this didn't come too often.

The man went out the swinging doors of the saloon and Howard now followed quickly behind, moving slightly faster in his confidence. His smile broadened as the stranger kept his sights forward. Once the doors closed behind him, Howard stopped, standing on the stoop of the saloon. Technically, this was outside. The stranger walked on, going down the wooden steps and stepping onto the dirt path that led through town. The man had taken only a few paces before Howard drew his revolver and put a bullet square in the stranger's back.

The shot rang out like cannon fire in the air of the desert.

But the man was still standing.

In fact, aside from a slight grunt and a small hitch forward as the bullet slammed through the back of his coat, the man hardly seemed to notice he'd been shot.

Howard stood there, feet spread, finger on the trigger, sweat forming on his brow under the hat he wore. He waited for the other man to fall down dead. Nearly prayed for it.

But he didn't fall.

"It figures," the stranger said, still in the same calm, matter-of-fact depth he'd spoken in up to now, "that a man who'd shoot his own wife would shoot another man in the back."

The stranger turned around. The wind picked up, blowing his hair about and the flaps of his coat aside. Howard saw a belt full of bullets at the man's waist, and a holster at the his right leg where a big black revolver rested comfortable. Then Howard's eyes fell onto the man's chest. A vest scarred by what looked like bullet holes and knife punctures was now on display for Howard to see. One two-inch, ragged bullet hole in particular had torn through the man's undershirt and vest, a thin trickle of blood pouring down the dark fabric. Howard's bullet had gone straight through the man, just under his heart. Right through bone and muscle, without a cry or scream from him. By the easy stare on the stranger's face, Howard may as well have shot him with a toy slingshot and a pellet.

"What in the name of--" Howard started, already taking aim again.

It was no use, though. The stranger was quick, and Howard's surprise and befuddlement made him slow. The other man had drawn, cocked his Colt, and fired off two rounds-- one to Howard's chest, the other just below his throat-- before he could finish. He fell to the wooden stoop and sending up a puff of dust as the floorboards creaked under his fall, blood misting in the air around where he'd stood.

Howard lay there, the life gone out of him before he'd even hit the stoop, spread-eagled with his Colt lying inches from his hand.

The man calmly slid his revolver back into its spot at his side and moved towards the trough, where two horses-- Howard's, and the stranger's dark red bray with a tail and mane of utter black, a blood bray as the type was often called-- stood. The stranger grabbed something from the pack that was strapped to the animal's back. A shovel.

He stepped forward, back towards the saloon, and climbed the few steps up to the stoop. He paid no mind to the faces of the bartender and the three patrons staring out at him through the dirty windows of the establishment. He leaned over, grabbing hold of the body once known as Matthew Howard by the ankle of his chaps, and turned back around, dragging the dead man down the stoop. Howard's limp head and arms smacked against each of the steps, body scraped along the road as he was pulled through the dirt.

One of the old men, Samuel, moved to the doorway of the saloon, peering out while the others stayed at the windows. Craning his wrinkled neck over the swinging doors, he watched as the stranger pulled the man along through the empty street and past the remaining buildings to the so-called outskirts of the township.

From where they stood, looking through the filthy glass, the bartender and his two friends couldn't see what the stranger was doing now.

"What the hell is he doin' with him?" one of the men asked Samuel.

Samuel, eyes wide and lips trembling, said "he's digging up a grave."

Nearly an hour passed as the stranger tended to his digging and Samuel watched, running through the list of stories he'd heard and retold-- though never personally witnessed-- again and again in his mind. He'd have a firsthand account to tell now. By God, he surely would.

After the shallow grave was finished the stranger kicked the body of Matthew Howard into it, but not before he stooped down and grabbed something off of the dead man. From his distance, Samuel couldn't rightly tell what.

When he was done filling the hole, the stranger turned and made his way back to the saloon.

The bartender and the three men scurried back to their spots, acting as if nothing had occurred in the last two hours. Nothing at all. But they were dreadfully nervous about seeing the man come back through the doorway. They heard his boots and spurs as he mounted the steps. Then a pause before he eventually entered once again. They took full notice of the bullet-hole and blood on his chest, but didn't dare speak of either. In his hands was a small tied up pouch and Howard's revolver.

He stepped up to the bar, his head bowed low, not making eye contact with either patrons or proprietor. He set the gun down on the counter, then opened the pouch-- Howard's coin purse. He took out several coins and dropped them on the counter.

"For that man's drinks, and for my own." He paused, thinking, then took out a few more coins and dropped them down as well. "And for the blood out front." Then he tied the pouch up and slid it into the inside of his coat. His fingers brushed against Howard's gun, sliding it down the counter to where the bartender stood at a safe distance.

"Do what you will with that," the man said, turning back around and heading for the doors. "Its owner has no use for it anymore."

He stepped outside, the doors swinging shut behind him.

Samuel rose and rushed over to the doorway, though both his friends urged him to stay out of fear. But he had to see the man. Had to see how it played out. Had to get the full story set in his mind for the future telling. Again, he peered out and watched.

The man had replaced his shovel on his pack and was mounting his blood bray. He nudged his ride away from

the trough, facing it north and in the opposite direction both he and Howard had rode in from. At a slow trot, the man-- who had been shot straight through and didn't die, who Samuel would forevermore swear was the gunslinging gravedigger of ghost stories and growing legends-- made his way out of town.

Samuel watched to see if the stranger would spare a glance at the gravesite of the man he'd just killed as he passed it by, but he did no such thing.

He rode on.

The End.

CASE #11930

THE STRANGER

BY PATRICK WINTERS



Patrick Winters is a 22 year-old senior attending Illinois College in Jacksonville, IL. He is studying in the areas of English Literature and Creative Writing. As a student, he is a member of the international English honor society, Sigma Tau Delta, and is a co-editor in chief of the college's literary magazine, *Forte*. He has previously published stories through the NOOK, PlayWithDeath.com's *The Nightmare Collective*, and has a forthcoming story set to appear in the magazine *Trysts of Fate*. You can keep up with his projects or contact him through his author's page at <https://www.facebook.com/patrickwintersauthor?fref=ts>



Gorge

by Jesse Morrison

Physician: Dr. Roundtree
8245-AVD12

#12247

CASE #: 12247



GORGE

BY JESSE MORRISON

THE GORGE TRUDGED THROUGH THE OZARK MOUNTAINS, limping past towering sycamores and gnarled cedars, pushing its way through miles of entangled vines, and pulverizing fallen hickory nuts and branches underneath its steel-toed boots, casualties of the creature's search for the meal that would save its life. If you caught a glimpse of the Gorge, you might mistake it for a man, taller than most at about six-foot-four and quite a bit overweight, but still just a man in a pair of mud-stained overalls, its blue jean fabric fit to split from the strain of his hairy blob of a belly. But if you looked closer, really gave the Gorge a hard squint, you would know that what you saw was no man.

The head that sat atop the Gorge's shoulders was a skinless, hairless, fully exposed skull made of hard clay with patches of green moss peppering its gray cheeks like acne. The whites of its lidless eyes looked like twin smashed windshields with twisting blood vessels spiderwebbing across them. The creature still had calloused, human skin covering its catcher mitt-sized hands, but the flesh was sagging from its clay bones and would fall off soon enough just like its face had. The Gorge didn't know what it was, nor did it care.

All it cared about was finding its next meal, which was no easy task.

It couldn't just grab a handful of berries and chow down. Well, it could, but the fruit wouldn't fill the ever-

widening emptiness inside it, a hunger that consumed its every thought. The clay the monster was made of could only digest one thing: human. And so the flesh it devoured, the bones it crunched, the blood it soaked up like a sponge, all had to come from one.

One week earlier a man named Rusty Strum-- an obese woodworker wanted for questioning in the disappearance of Lindsey Barnes, a fourteen-year-old girl from nearby Mountain View, Arkansas-- hid out in a cave beneath the Ozarks. The batteries in his flashlight died on the second day he was inside, and Rusty got lost trying to navigate the cavern's labyrinthine system. With the cave's impenetrable darkness closing around him like a fist, Rusty went mad with panic and tried to dig his way out with the hammer he had on his tool belt. Claw-end first, he raised it over his head and drove it into the wall.

Crack!

For hours, he did this. He'd raise the hammer and crack! Raise and crack! Raise and crack, crying, sobbing, and screaming louder and louder with each blow.

"I don't wanna die!"

Raise and crack!

"Please help me!"

Raise and crack!

"I'm sorry!"

Raise and crack!

"Please, God, gimme outta here!"

Rusty raised it one last time, swung, and this time the hammer hit nothing but air. He reached his right arm straight out in front of him and, like the hammer, touched nothing. He had just pounded a large hole in the wall. Excited, and feeling as though his prayers had just been answered, Rusty belted out a laugh of relief so piercing that the echo of it stung his ears. He pulled himself up and into the hole and began crawling on all fours, but it wasn't long until he realized that he was moving downward, not forward. He was sinking into a mass of living clay that had lain dormant inside the cave's wall for centuries. This was the Gorge, and the Gorge was hungry. The sentient liquid forced its way into Rusty's mouth, slid down his throat, and ate him from the inside out.

But that wasn't the end of Rusty Strum. After its meal, the Gorge dressed itself in Rusty's hair and flesh, assumed the man's voice and memories, climbed out of the cave, and began hiking through the mountains looking for food. Hibernation had kept the Gorge alive for all those years, but now that it was out in the world, expending an enormous amount of energy with each step it took, the creature had to keep itself fed. It hoped it would stumble across a buffet, maybe a campground filled to capacity with families of fat people.

But that didn't happen.

Two days passed without the Gorge spotting anyone, not even a lone backpacker, and now the creature was starving and falling apart. The hair and flesh that had once covered its head and helped make it a dead ringer for Rusty Strum had fallen off a few miles back. Even if it did find someone, the creature was too weak to chase or attack them. It needed to find food that wouldn't fight back. Luckily, the creature knew just where to go.

The Gorge emerged at the top of a sandstone escarpment streaked orange with algae, a cliff that towered forty feet above Stone Pool, which was a wide reservoir of deep, near-stagnate creek water that emptied over the top of a dam, cascaded down its arch of slick cobblestones, and then crashed on a bed of rubble at the bottom. In the 1930s, the Civilian Conservation Corps built the dam out of rocks from the mountain to form a swimming hole for campers, but few ever dared dipped their feet in the pool. The immense depth of the water and the fungal film writhing with mosquito larvae on the pool's surface frightened off even the bravest of swimmers.

On a dry spot on top of the dam, in between twisting rivulets of creek water, a snake that was sprawled out and soaking up the afternoon sun raised its head when two shirtless and sweaty boys, about fifteen-years-old, raced out from a line of trees bordering Stone Pool. They were wearing blue jean cut-offs and old tennis shoes too raggedy for everyday wear but perfect for padding the soles of feet against the sharp chunks of gravel that blanketed the beach.

The obvious alpha of the two boys-- a tall, blond kid with a golden tan and a sinewy build, the epitome of

swaggering bravado and confidence-- picked up a smooth stone from the beach and pointed out the snake to his friend-- a short, squirrely, sprig-thin redhead with freckles splattered all across his fair skin.

"Hey, check it out, Coll. Sucker's about to get hisself brained," the alpha said in a deep Arkansas twang.

"No, Davis! Don't! That's a--!"

Davis flung the stone at the snake, but the rock missed its mark, hit the dam with a loud crack, startled the reptile, and sent it slithering into the still water.

"Water moccasin!" the redhead Coll shouted as he backed up several steps away from the shoreline.

"So?"

"So, it's poisonous!"

"Gone's what it is," Davis said. "I scared it off."

"No, you pissed it off! You didn't scare it off! You know what it's doing now, don't you?"

"Uh, swimming?"

"No! Lurking! Plotting, down there just waiting for the perfect time to come out and fang us in the behind!"

"God, Collin, no. It ain't," Davis said, rolling his eyes. "Can't ya just, I don't know, stop being you for like five seconds?"

"Now, how would I do something like that? I don't know how to be somebody else."

"Don't know either, but ya best figure it out quick 'cause the you ya are's driving me outta my skull."

Davis turned around and started walking down the beach.

"Where you going?" Collin asked.

"Dam," Davis said.

"Why?"

"Gonna climb down it."

"What for?"

"Fun."

"Fun? Busting your ass and breaking your neck sounds like fun to you?"

"I ain't gonna fall."

"But you could."

"But I won't."

"But you might."

"But I won't!" Davis spun back around at Collin. "Ga! You know something?"

"What?"

"Sometimes it's you I wanna brain with a rock."

Once the Gorge finished sizing up the boys and choosing which of the two best served its needs, it stepped back from the cliff's edge, took off its boots and overalls-- it would need dry clothes after it fed-- then wadded them up in a ball, stood up straight, and then froze, shocked at the sight of its body's deterioration. Fillets of gangrenous flesh writhing with maggots dangled by strands from its shoulders, arms, and legs like stripped deer meat hung in the sun for too long. Its skeleton of dry, cracked marl was made visible through the wide gashes.

"Well, dern," it said in Rusty's voice, its Southern accent thicker than the boys'. "Ain't that a son-of-a...?"

A sudden pang of hunger whipped through the Gorge, doubling the creature over in agony. Its belly, an unmixed batter of skin, blood, and cellulite the color and consistency of congealed chicken broth, fell from its abdomen and landed in a splat on the rock. The deep, hungry growl that bellowed out from the Gorge's body rattled the forest and echoed off the bluffs. Flocks of birds exploded from the trees in flight. Deer ran away faster than they would if they'd heard the crack of a fired rifle. The Gorge climbed up to its feet, yanked the remaining noodles of flesh from its body, flung them into the woods, and then gazed back down at the swimming hole with salivating eyes.

Collin's mouth hung open as he stared across the beach at his best friend. He couldn't believe Davis's

explanation for the roaring boom they just heard.

"Tree fell? That's what you think that was? Are you kidding? That's probably what fricking Hiroshima sounded like!"

"Who?" Davis asked, standing next to the dam, looking down its arch for a good foothold to begin his descent. "What powers she got?"

"Hunh? What powers does who have?"

"Hero Shima. She's from one of your comic books, right?"

"Dude, seriously," Collin said, shaking his head. "You were sitting right next to me in history class last year."

"Yeah, so?" Davis turned his back to the dam, faced Collin, and folded his arms across his puffed-out chest. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"Nothing, man," Collin said. "Never--"

A wad of clothes landed behind Collin in the shallow banks, cutting him off. Startled, he twisted around, glanced up, and saw a man dive forty feet down from the top of the huge rock bluff on the other side of the creek and disappear with a giant splash in the still water. Collin took a quick study of the bluff, saw that there were no trails leading up it, and then shouted, "Now that looks like fun! A lot more fun than climbing down a dam."

"Hold up a minute," Davis said, walking up the beach to Collin. "You tryin to tell me you'd jump off 'a there?"

"Sure would," Collin said.

"Pfft, whatever."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Means you'd get all the way up there and crap your panties, ya big chicken shit."

Collin stumbled backward a step, stunned.

"Wh-what'd you just call me?"

Davis winced, his face instantly awash with remorse. It was obvious that Davis wished he could take back that word, but he could wish all he wanted, and it wouldn't make a difference. That particular swear was a declaration of war to a teenage boy. There were no take-backs when it came to a burn as searing as "chicken shit."

"Nothin," Davis mumbled.

"I'm not a chicken shit!"

"Okay. Shouldn't've said it."

"But you did say it," Collin said.

"But I shouldn't have."

"But you did!"

"Yeah and I shouldn't have!"

Collin stepped in so close to Davis that their noses almost touched.

"Look me in the eye, and tell me you don't think I'm a chicken shit."

"All right, you're not a--"

A slight smile cracked across Davis's face.

"I knew it!" Collin shouted.

"I'm sorry, Coll," Davis said with a chuckle. "It's just... Well, you saying you ain't a chicken's like you sayin you ain't got red hair."

"No, it's not the same thing at all! One's true, and the other's not! I'm just cautious, you know, vigilant about safety and stuff."

"Oh come on, Coll. Be for real. You ain't a vigilante."

"Vigilant! Not vigilante, you dumbass!"

Davis's eyes widened. The golden hue of his skin paled. Davis threw balls and ran down fields and scored goals like few at their high school could, but the boy couldn't, no matter how hard he tried, pass a grade level without the help of a coach strong-arming one of his teachers. Collin knew all about the exposed and sensitive nerve Davis had when it came to his lack of book smarts, and he never thought he would strike it, but he also never thought his best friend would call him a chicken shit either.

"D-don't call me that," Davis said. "I ain't... I mean, I'm not dumb."

"No? Tell that to your report card, Hero Shima!"

"Shut up, chicken shit!"

Collin squeezed his eyes shut to try to contain the fury boiling up inside him. He told himself that it wasn't true, that Davis didn't know what he was talking about. Collin wasn't a chicken shit. Sure, he approached most things with a higher level of awareness than most boys his age did, but like he told Davis, that made him vigilant. Vigilant. Collin ran the word over and over in his mind. For the first time since he learned the meaning of the word in Ms. Nash's English class and decided to use it to describe his approach to safety, Collin saw it for the lie it was. He wasn't vigilant. He really was a chicken shit. The strong hand of panic grabbed his heart and squeezed. Collin had to do something bold, something no chicken shit would ever do, something to wipe the record clean of that awful word, not just with Davis, but also with himself. So, he did it. Collin opened his eyes and socked his best friend in the mouth.

The look Davis had on his face while he cradled his jaw in his right hand reminded Collin of something else he'd learned about World War II in class.

Something about waking a sleeping giant.

Collin said, "Wait!" But Davis didn't wait. He buried his left fist into Collin's gut, jumped behind him, and then put Collin in a headlock by wrapping his right arm around his neck.

"Apologize!" Davis demanded as he pressed his forearm into Collin's throat.

Collin shook his head and sealed his lips tight. No way was he going to give into the demands of someone who had just called him a chicken shit. No way, no how. Sure, Davis was stronger than Collin, but nowhere near as stubborn. Collin would just stare across the still pool and wait his friend out. That was the plan, but it didn't work out that way. Something happened. A strange and uncomfortable feeling settled over Collin. The longer he stared at the creek, the colder the sweat on his skin became. Something was very wrong, and it had nothing to do with his ass getting kicked and everything to do with Stone Pool, the water, the stillness of it.

"D-Davis!" Collin shouted through a choked breath. "Look!"

"Yeah, right. Like I'm gonna fall for that."

"It's not a trick! For real! Look!" Collin jabbed a finger out at the water.

"What? I don't see anything."

"Exactly! Dude hasn't come up for air!"

A pause. "So? Probably got out while we weren't lookin'."

"And left naked?" Collin swung his arm around and pointed at the wad of wet clothes still lying on the shore.

Another pause. "Oh," Davis said.

"Yeah, oh!"

As soon as Collin felt Davis's arm go slack around his throat he leapt to his feet, ran to the water's edge with Davis on his heels, and scanned the creek from right to left, searching for any sign of the diver.

"How long you think he's been down there?" Davis asked.

"I look like a stopwatch? How should I--?"

Right then, the water moccasin fired out of the creek, shot in between the two boys, raced up the rocky beach, and then disappeared into the forest, hell bent on putting as much distance between it and Stone Pool as it could. Shocked dumb by the sight, both boys turned to one another with mouths agape, locked eyes for a moment, and then twisted back around to the creek.

Like a shark fin, a small ball of mud domed the surface of the water and drifted towards the bank. In an unheard of gesture between two teenage boys, Collin and Davis grabbed each other's hand, and then retreated up the beach. They were standing at the forest's tree line when it became clear to them what they were looking at: a head attached to shoulders, a body, the diver straining to back out of Stone Pool dragging a huge, stainless steel travel trunk out of the creek with all his might. Covered in mud the gray of an overcast sky, the man stepped out of the water, dropped the chest, stumbled several paces toward the shoreline, and collapsed onto his knees from exhaustion with his back to the trunk as the muck rolled off his body in thick waves.

Their hands still squeezed tight together, Collin felt Davis's pulse jackhammering through their skin. They glanced down at their interlocked hands, screwed their faces up in disgust, pulled their hands back, and wiped their palms on their jean shorts to get the sap off.

"Hey, Blondie," the diver said without turning around, his voice a Southern drawling wheeze.

Davis rolled his eyes up as if he needed a reminder what color his hair was.

"Davis?" the diver said a little louder. "That yer name, right?"

The boys jumped.

"H-how'd you know that?" Davis asked, stuttering.

"Heard you two yappin from up yonder," the diver said, nodding up to the cliff from where he jumped. "Why don't ya come on over here a sec?"

"Aw, hell on that," Davis said, whispering into Collin's ear. "Let's go."

Davis grabbed Collin by the shoulder and tried to steer him into the forest, but Collin stood firm and wouldn't budge. He couldn't believe what he just heard come out of Davis's mouth, not the words, the tone. Davis was afraid. Collin was too, but he could hide his fear. He had to. Collin fought back the urge to smile. This was it, the bold move Collin needed to make to prove that he wasn't a chicken shit, and he didn't have to punch anyone in the face. All he had to do was something Mr. Billy Badass himself was too afraid to try: Collin had to talk to a stranger.

That was all.

"No," Collin said.

"What do ya mean, no?" Davis asked. "You blind? Something ain't right here."

"Yeah. A man almost drowned," Collin said with a condescending, snotty tone.

"That's what I'm sayin. He's what ain't right. Dude was down there for what, like five, ten minutes? Shouldn't be no 'almost' about it. Man oughta be dead and I sure as hell don't wanna find out why he ain't."

"You're scared," Collin said.

"Hell yeah, I am, and you should be, too!"

"Well, I'm not."

"Ya are too. Now, quit playing and let's go."

Davis rolled his eyes and tried to pull Collin into the forest, but again Collin stood firm.

"No! I'm not scared. And I'm not going anywhere."

"Coll--!"

"No!"

Davis sighed and dropped his hands by his side.

"Fine. Guess I'm stayin too, then."

"Why?" Collin asked.

Davis scrunched up his face and looked just as offended as he had when Collin called him a dumbass.

"Why? What do you mean, why? 'Cause you're my boy, that's why, butt plug. I ain't leavin you alone with some weird-ass dude."

"Oh," Collin said, shaken a little by hearing the nicest thing his friend had ever said to him.

"Hey, you lovers done with that spat yet?" the diver asked. "'Cause if ya are, I got me a favor to ask of ya."

Davis nodded to the man and then nudged Collin.

"Well, go on. It's your show."

Collin balled his hands into fists to keep them from shaking, walked down the beach with Davis by his side, and approached the diver who was still on his knees facing the creek with his head hunched low.

"Y-you need us to g-get you some help?" Collin asked in a stammer.

"Naw. Davis'll do me just fine," the man said, jutting his head back behind him.

"Why me?" Davis asked.

"'Cause ya got sack. Saw how ya went after that snake."

"Hey!" Collin shouted, offended. "He's not helping you. I am. You're dealing with me. And I have sack too! A big

one!"

The diver stayed quiet for a moment and then shrugged.

"Well, all right then. Guess it don't matter who, s'long as it gets done."

"So long as what gets done?" Collin asked.

"The chest. Need ya to get in it for me," the diver said, jutting his head back at the chest.

Collin looked down, saw a rusted combination padlock in the trunk's center latch, and then glanced up at Davis who was shaking his head wildly from side-to-side, mouthing, "No."

"What's the combination?" Collin asked.

"Four letters," the diver said. "R-O-C-K."

"Hunh?"

"Lock's too rusted up to give er a spin. Need ya to break it off with a rock. Do it myself, but I'm so weak I can barely lift a finger let alone a stone."

Collin gave the trunk a light kick. "What's inside it?"

"Well, treasure, of course," the diver said. "In a chest, ain't it?"

"You put it here?" Collin asked.

"Naw. Fella I met coupla days back did."

Collin leaned down, but Davis stepped in his way.

"Your cray-dar busted or somethin?" Davis said in a panicked whisper. "Talkin to him's one thing. Openin up some scary-ass chest is another. Seriously, Coll, we need to be runnin right now!"

Collin knew Davis was right about everything. The diver should have been dead, and no way was there really a treasure inside that trunk. Every voice in Collin's head told him to run, save for one.

Shut up, chicken shit. Chicken shit. Chicken shit. Chicken shit!

Collin shoved Davis out of his way, picked up a large cobblestone from the beach, crouched down in front of the chest, raised the rock over his head, drove it straight down onto the lock, snapped the metal shank with a crunch, unclashed the latch, and flung open the lid. It took a few seconds of staring inside the trunk for Collin to form a thought, but when it happened, when the words came together in his head, they crippled him, paralyzing him from the neck down.

I just got us killed.

Submerged in the trunk of clear creek water was the "treasure," a dead girl in a powder blue sundress that had been rolled down to her waist. She was a little younger than Collin, with small, undeveloped breasts and dishwater gray skin that drooped off her thin body like folds on a Shar-Pei. The girl's name was Lindsey Barnes. Collin didn't know her personally, but he had heard of her. Everyone within a hundred miles radius of Mountain View had. She was the fourteen-year-old girl who had gone missing a few days ago. But she wasn't missing anymore. Collin had found her, and he really wished he hadn't.

Crawdads scurried out of the collar-thick gash in Lindsey's throat, crawled up her face, and disappeared in the thick thatch of sopping wet black hair on her head, the top half of which resembled a squashed bean bag chair, her forehead caved in from a blow that had struck her so hard that it crossed her eyes. Someone, the diver, Collin figured, had bludgeoned and stabbed Lindsey to death, broken her arms and legs in several places, and then wadded her up inside the trunk like a ball of newspaper.

"Run, Collin!" Davis shouted. "Run! Run--!"

"Hey, now, don't do that," the diver said as he stood up and turned around. "Gonna need me a real meal after I get my strength up."

Davis stopped screaming and froze.

The diver's hands, which weren't hands at all but globs of mud, fell off his arms, landed on the beach, and laid there like freshly dumped cow patties. The man, who wasn't a man at all but a thing made of thick, brown clay, began walking up the beach towards Collin and the chest, lumbering, struggling with each step as its legs stuck on the gravel and pulled free of its body. By the time it reached Collin, the thing was just a torso, two upper arms, and a featureless head.

"Get away from him!" Davis screamed.

The creature ignored Davis, reached down, and pressed its muddy stump of a left arm against Collin's right shoulder. Its mouth, its only vaguely human characteristic, opened, and out flowed pond scum twisting with slimy tadpoles and dead minnows.

"Shoulda let me be like ya done that snake, Coll," it said. "Shoulda let me be."

The diver turned, climbed inside the chest, and like a chocolate Easter bunny nuked inside a microwave, dissolved, coating Lindsey's body in clay, and then flashed to a boil. Bubbles rose over every inch of her body, her flesh sizzling, popping, and corroding off her bones as the clay ate her.

Davis rushed over to Collin and crouched down behind him.

"Hell ya doin? Get off your ass and run!"

Even though Collin very much wanted to do both of those things, he couldn't. He couldn't move, could not even blink. The only thing on his body that moved was his dick, and that did so without his permission when it released a stream of piss down his leg as he watched a slender manikin of clay grow five feet tall in the middle of the chest.

Davis cupped his hands under Collin's armpits and tried to drag Collin away from the trunk as he screamed, "It's getting its strength up, man! It's getting its strength up! Ya gotta get up! We're the real meal! We're the real meal!"

Strips of skin lashed around the clay manikin. Black, lustrous hair sprouted out of its scalp and fell down past its shoulders. Eyeballs bubbled up inside its sockets and hardened. Lids grew over them and then blinked open. It was Lindsey Barnes, her body unharmed, skin flush with color, holding the wet dress in her hand and licking her red smiling lips.

Right then, Collin made a solemn vow to never again hide from or deny his fear. From that day on, he would wear a hooded, Kevlar-lined onesie of fear with the words "Chicken Shit and Proud" embroidered on the front in big letters, and he would never take it off because the only way to survive this ugly, nasty, terrifying world was to fear it, to keep your feet running away from it, and your head hidden far from its sight. No more thinking about jumping off cliffs. No more opening steel chests. And absolutely no more talking to strangers. Wear the onesie and live to see another day.

Collin reached up, grabbed Davis's arm, and pushed up to his feet.

"Oh thank God!" Davis shouted. "Now, can we run?"

"Oh yeah," Collin said. "Now, we can run."

And he never stopped.

The End

CASE #12247

GORGE

BY JESSE MORRISON



Jesse Morrison writes screenplays, short stories, and is currently finishing his first novel. He has a B.A. in Communication with a concentration in film and video from the University of Memphis. His first screenplay, "Bluff City," made the quarterfinals of the BlueCat Screenplay Competition in 2008. Also, when time allows, he hosts Write Club Memphis, a group of writers who come together monthly to discuss someone's script or short story. For more on Jesse, you can find him online at www.facebook/memflix."



Solitude

by Christopher J. Ferguson

Physician: Dr. Peterson
8268-WCT29

#70311

CASE #: 70311



SOLITUDO

BY CHRISTOPHER J. FERGUSON

HAVING JUST WATCHED A MAN DESCEND INTO HYSTERICAL PARANOIA, Roger Wright wanted nothing more than to retire to his quarters, lie down and go to sleep. There were scratches all over his forearms that he had gotten helping hold the man down, saliva still caked on his face from the man's spittle, his muscles and bones were sore from the struggle to keep the man still while he could be injected with something to calm him down, render him no longer a danger to himself and others. It didn't help that the man was a friend, David Mason, who within a week's time had gone from one of the world's finest astrophysicists to a paranoid schizophrenic, ranting and raving about alien abductions and secret tests. It was a shame that kept Roger from sleeping well to see such a good man derailed so. It would have been better too, had it not happened here, or now, on board the *Cassini* a mere 100,000 miles above the cloud tops of Jupiter. There were no psychiatrists here, no proper medications, and a good year or more of travel in the opposite direction to return to Earth.

Exhausted, Roger found a plastic chair overlooking the Jovian gas giant that swirled below them like a giant hydrogen soup. He wanted, no needed, a few minutes to be alone and reflect. Perhaps he should have prepared for this possibility, that one of his crew of four would go mad on the long journey. He would have been ready for almost anything else, technical difficulty (they had plenty of those), communication failure (which they were

currently experiencing), but this was something beyond his experience. All of his people had been carefully screened. True, this mission to Jupiter was one of the longest manned missions through space to date, and it was bound to take a psychological toll. But Roger had believed that his people, David included, had been up to the task.

It was at moments like this that Roger realized just what they were missing on Earth. There was no alcohol to be had to calm his frayed nerves, no proper way to exercise in order to release tension, and frankly no privacy. That was clear almost immediately as his moment of peace was broken by his agitated pilot, Agnes Levine. She appeared from the medical bay, herself covered in bruises and scratches and demanded Roger's attention, face red, hands on hips.

"What in the name of all that is sacred are we supposed to do now?" she demanded, as if NASA would have prepared them for an outcome like this. Behind her from down the hall David could still be heard groaning, moaning, still mumbling about the aliens that came at night to experiment on him. Agnes was an excellent technical person, a wonderful pilot and career military. People skills and empathy were not her strong points and from the look on her face Roger guessed she hoped he might suggest they jettison David straight into space. "Are we supposed to turn this tub of junk around and bring him home?" That was an unfair assessment of the Cassini. True they had lost all communication with Earth once they had entered Jupiter's magnetosphere and the communication equipment seemed to resist all attempts to fix it, but the ship had kept wonderfully on course and intact despite having to resist Jupiter's strong gravitational pull and radiation output. And Agnes knew as well as Roger that there was no turning around. Even if it were professionally possible (it wasn't) they were counting on rounding Jupiter to allow its gravitational forces to slingshot them back toward Earth.

"We'll have to keep him as safe as we can," Roger said lamely, not really able to think of much else more reassuring.

"Really," she said angrily, not so much at Roger, just blowing off frustration, "strapped to a medical gurney for the next year and a half? We don't even have a locked room to stick him in. I can't believe this, of all the stupid things to go wrong."

Roger looked at her sympathetically. He understood her frustration, just as he felt sympathy for poor David, who would have to endure whatever answer they came up with, and it wasn't likely to be a comfortable one, "It happens, Agnes. I've heard of cases of men on submarines who go through the same thing. They have to jam them in some closet and go on with the mission. I don't see many alternatives here."

Her expression remained steamed, but Roger was saved from further vitriol on her part by the fourth and final member of their crew, the ship's physician Richard Gilmour. He was the oldest of them, near sixty and soft-spoken, a decent enough old fellow, Roger thought. "I've got David sedated," Richard said with an apologetic look, "we don't have that much sedative though, it won't last long. He's got a bit of a fever too, possibly due to the over stimulation of his sympathetic nervous system."

"Could it be possible that he has an infection that's doing this to him?" Roger asked. The suggestion had both silver and black linings. An infection offered the possibility of both a cure, and a spread to the rest of the crew.

Richard shook his head though, "No, I don't think so. His fever is not high enough to bring on delirium, and I see no evidence of an encephalitic infection or encephalopathy. Of course I don't really have the proper instruments here..." he let the sentence hang. "I'm sorry, Captain."

"How could David catch an infection out here after a year?" Agnes demanded, wheeling on the doctor.

"People carry all manner of pathogens, viruses, parasites, some of which lie dormant for months or years," Richard explained patiently, "I don't think that's the case here, but perhaps to be sure we should only approach David with gloves and masks on."

Roger shook his head, "That won't exactly help his paranoia about medical experiments will it? Besides, it's a bit late for that," he pointed toward the scratches along his own arm.

Richard patted him on the shoulder, "Why don't the two of you get some rest, I'll keep an eye on David." In lieu of any better ideas there was nothing else to be done for the moment. Roger concurred with Richard's suggestion. He and Agnes quietly left the ship under Richard's watch while they attempted to rest and forget what had occurred onboard for at least a few moments.

Rest did not come easy. That was hardly unexpected under the current circumstances, although the truth was that Roger had not been sleeping well for weeks. Perhaps he too had been feeling the strain that had cracked David. Ultimately it would be he to whom people looked if the mission were a success or a failure. The loss of communication with Earth troubled him greatly. He was at a loss to explain it other than that the machinery itself must be fatally flawed and unfixable. He wished he could believe that moving through Jupiter's radiation belts was responsible although, of course, far more primitive unmanned ships than the Cassini had maintained contact with Earth at even closer distances. Unless he figured out what was wrong with the equipment (an unlikely prospect after it being broken for so long) they would have no further contact with Earth until they returned, some year and a half hence. That had no real practical impact on the mission, but left him feeling bleak and abandoned somehow. How he missed Earth with its blue skies and cool fragrant air. Being a part of this historic mission was an exciting time, but Jupiter was, frankly, a swirling ugly mass that looked angry and hostile. Of his crew he had only really connected with David and even that now, well, was gone.

As it had been for the past few weeks, his attempts at sleep resulted in fragmented bits of sleep and wakefulness. His sleep was restless and punctuated by nightmares that he could not recall upon waking. These left him feeling just as tired after his sleep period as when he had gone to sleep. There were no sleeping medications on the Cassini. Aside from the warm milk that Richard prepared for him each night, he was on his own. After wrestling with David, tonight it was only worse. He tried to sleep for several hours without success before abandoning his efforts.

There frankly wasn't a lot else to do on the ship. Except in emergencies the Cassini ran itself. True it was nice to have humans on hand to repair any breakdowns in equipment, but the truth was that, scientifically speaking, this mission around Jupiter was unlikely to break ground that hadn't already been tread by unmanned ships. Roger was acutely aware of the twofold purpose of a manned mission around Jupiter: 1.) To be able to say it was possible and 2.) To see what happened to humans after long periods in space. There was an animal lab on board the Cassini, and Roger thought perhaps he should check on some of the experiments in there but he frankly wasn't in the mood. There wasn't much else to do except for books, computer games and television (they had been getting updated feeds from Earth until the communications quit). No essentially this was one long cruise around Jupiter. That wasn't to say that Roger wasn't thrilled to be a part of this historic moment in time; humankind pushing the limits of manned space exploration. This was the first manned ship to use an artificial gravity machine (rather than centrifugal force) and NASA was eager to see how it worked and whether they all returned riddled with tumors from its effects. But aside from the historical angle, this was shaping up to be the most boring and lonely two and a half years of his life. That was until today; now it was just lonely.

Roger found himself wandering sleepily to the medical bay. It seemed a good idea to check in on David, see how he was doing. The indefatigable Richard Gilmour was there, still awake and keeping his vigil over his restless ward. The lights in the sick bay were kept low as if that might sooth David, but it didn't seem to be working. David was clearly more under control than earlier, owing to a combination of improvised restraints and sedatives, but he was still murmuring and agitated.

"No better?" Roger asked, patting Richard comfortingly on the back.

"Afraid not," Richard replied, "I thought you were going to try to get some rest?"

"Couldn't sleep..." Roger replied motioning toward David, "Thought maybe I'd have a talk with him."

Richard's shrug made clear how much he thought that would get them, "I wouldn't mind brewing up some tea if you could keep an eye on him a bit. None for you though...I'll warm you up some milk if you like, might help you to sleep."

"Sounds good, thank you." As Richard left to make his way to the cafeteria, Roger moved closer to David to inspect him. David had not escaped the cuts and bruises of their scuffle and there were longer cuts along his arms where he had been clawing at himself, trying to get something out of himself. Richard had somehow gotten him into a hospital gown and cleaned him up some, but he was still difficult to watch. This man who he had used to spend long evenings with playing chess and talking religion was reduced to a twitching muttering ruin. Roger

knew enough about schizophrenia to know people didn't simply bounce back from it, that medication was little more than a hollow promise. He felt sorry for his friend.

David stirred at Roger's approach and opened his eyes. The pupils were wide and the sclera bloodshot, the eyeballs twisted back and forth like a panicking horse. "Roger!" he nearly hissed, trying to reach out with his restrained hands.

"Relax, buddy," Roger said, putting a hand comfortingly on his shoulder, well out of reach of those grasping hands, "You're okay. You gotta be calm, we're just trying to figure out what happened to you today."

"What happened?" David hissed again, "I'll tell you what happened. They come at night, when we're sleeping... they take us into their ship..."

"Wait, wait..." Roger interrupted, "...you mean the aliens you were...talking about earlier?"

"Yes!" David said emphatically, as if Roger was believing him for the first time, "I've seen you there, and Agnes. They do the same thing to you that they've done to me. They think we're sleeping, but this time I woke up. They experiment on us, they put things in us..."

"David...I gotta tell you, there's no aliens out here. Our scanners are still working fine, we'd see them coming if they tried to abduct us, or the Cassini would sound a collision warning. It's not like we're in an Oklahoma trailer park out here."

"Listen to me!" David hissed, then seemed to think better of it, "I know, I know, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to talk to you like that..."

"It's okay David," Roger tried to reassure him, "I know you're not feeling well right now. You've got a bit of a fever, maybe some infection is doing this to you, Richard is going to try to find out for you okay? You gotta help us out a bit though, okay, you gotta try to fight against this. There's no aliens, it's just something you're brain's making up while it's sick."

"I know how this looks," David said, "I know something is wrong with me. I don't know what, I just can't think straight. But I know what I saw, and it wasn't a dream, it was real. Real as you are now. They were...horrible..."

"David," Roger said softly, "you tried to open an airlock without your spacesuit on, do you remember that? Do you remember fighting with us?" David watched him for a moment, then nodded his head. Roger pressed on, "Why did you do that?"

David seemed to think for a minute. Then with tears in his eyes he positively whimpered, "I don't know. They put stuff in us. They did this to me." Richard had reappeared next to Roger, and David shifted his attention to him, "Richard what did they do to me?"

Richard stroked the man's hair like a sick boy, "I don't know son, but we'll find out." His glance at Roger was less reassuring. The two of them stepped away from David out of earshot. Richard had his cup of tea and offered a tall glass of warm milk to Roger, who eagerly accepted.

"His fever is holding steady," Richard said with just a hint of concern, "which suggests that he does have an infection of some sort. I don't see any evidence that it's anything more than a cold, or that it has anything to do with his condition, but..."

"It is coincidental timing isn't it?" Roger said speculatively.

"It's not high enough to bring on hallucinations, he's adequately hydrated and I don't see any evidence of swelling in the brain or meninges," Richard regarded him very seriously, "I'm sure I don't need to tell you what a serious problem David is going to be. We are simply not provisioned to care for a psychotic man."

"Unless he gets better, I don't see what choice we have. What are your thoughts on recovery?"

"Frankly I don't understand the disease process well enough to offer a prognosis. David has no prior history of mental illness and onset was sudden. It's possible that with some time and relaxation he may recover. Unfortunately we don't even have the proper milieu to facilitate recovery from a psychotic episode brought on by stress. We'll have to hope that the sedatives are enough to calm him long enough for his brain to heal itself."

"If not, Agnes is going to want to let him walk out an airlock next time," he chuckled nervously, although his observation was only half a joke. "David was as healthy as any of us...what are the odds that this could happen to the rest of us?"

Richard shrugged, "Even in the worst of combat, only a percentage of soldiers, albeit a significant minority, suffer effects of stress so significant as to render them psychotic or otherwise mentally disturbed. Granted the conditions aboard the Cassini are not ideal, but I don't believe they are as bad as war. I wouldn't expect it...still I would be less concerned if you and Agnes would be getting sufficient sleep."

Roger took that as healthy advice from the doctor and raised his glass of milk as if in salute, "Believe me, I'm right there with you. Okay, I'll give it another go, if you feel that you can hold the fort until Agnes can get up. We're going to have to rotate eight hour sleep shifts between the three of us."

"Don't worry about me," Richard promised, "I'll keep an eye on David and the ship. You get some rest."

"Thank you," Roger said, and as he began moved away, added, "and be sure to let me know if any little aliens appear won't you?"

Rest, when it came, brought with it nightmares. In them, Roger came to share David's paranoia about space aliens. Roger dreamed that he, like David was taken from the Cassini aboard an alien craft while semi-conscious. It was there, with bright light glaring into his face that his dream began. Nearly shapeless black forms hovered over him, little more than silhouettes in front of that black light. He was strapped down to the table, although that seemed to be unnecessary as he could barely move, his muscles paralyzed. He had the sense that his own return to semi-consciousness was unexpected, as the forms seemed to become agitated as he opened his eyes.

A deep and foreboding fear came to him at that point. He was not properly oriented, rather the experience was dissociated as dreams often are, if frightening nonetheless. It seemed so unreal, and yet here it seemed that he was, strapped to the table. He started screaming, those muscles of his throat and chest apparently still functioning. This reaction was a primal one, not one calculated to ensure his release. It was a reaction of pure animal terror, the reaction of an experimental rat preparing to have its brain ablated with no hope of escape. The figures shuffled and squirmed and made excited groans between them at the sound of his screaming. Roger made no attempt to communicate with them, to reason with them, as he might have done had he been awake and the experience really happening to him. Rather, these amorphous shapes were like ghosts to a child, unexplainable, unreasonable and bent on causing harm.

He was aware then of a stinging pain in his left arm, acute and burning. The sensation began spreading throughout his arm, as if an acid were carried by his vascular system. He screamed louder than before, particularly when the pain hit his chest and he felt like he might die. It was as if that acidic fluid, ironically enough, had some form of sedating effect, although it was probably that the dream was over. Nonetheless, those shadowy forms receded, along with that blinding light and everything became darkness once again.

Roger was awake some indiscriminant amount of time later, not jolted awake by the nightmare, but rather brought to wakefulness by some natural change in his sleep cycle. Still he retained some tattered images of his dream and these caused him to have an anxious mood upon awakening. It was clear that David's psychological downturn had its effect on him, perhaps exacerbated by his own loneliness and isolation on this mission. Roger found himself continuing to feel poorly rested by his sleep.

Roger staggered to the small bathroom on board the Cassini to take care of his full bladder and wash himself. He checked in on David (Richard was now asleep, which made Roger feel relieved as Richard had been carrying more than his own weight over the past few days), and found him to be resting fitfully. Agnes was in the pilot's room, and he decided to inquire as to how she was doing as well.

"Lousy," she informed him, without gracing him with further detail. She was busily keying in commands to the ship's computer, for what purpose he wasn't sure.

The word hung in the air for some moments before Roger realized she wasn't going to expand upon it. "What exactly is it that you're doing there?" he asked her. The Cassini didn't normally require much input from its human crew. They were just on board to make the mission exciting to the folks on Earth.

"What do you think," she grumbled, still keying in commands to the computer and mumbling disappointedly at the results, "I'm looking for little green men from Mars, or whatever."

Another pause in the air while that comment hung, "You know Mars is a lot of miles back in the wrong direction,

right?"

She shot him an irritated look, "I'm looking into the scanner records over the last few weeks. I figured if I could bring David some of the data from the scanner, showing that there are no alien spaceships then perhaps he could bring his little reality vacation to a close."

"That was very thoughtful of you," he said with a hint of sarcasm that she ignored or missed, "so do I dare ask why you seem to be so displeased with the results?"

"The data's corrupted," she snarled, "The scanners are working fine in real time, but it's not recording the results properly to computer files. Meaning we can't look at any previous scanner data. Unless I can fix the data, which I can't seem to do..." A few more failed efforts produced some profanity on her part.

"But the scanner works right..." he asked with some trepidation. Without that they would be at serious risk of a hit from space "junk". They would get no warning of impending collision from a piece of rock, meteor, etc. That would be a much more serious technical failure than the loss of communications.

"Yeah its working," she said brusquely, "just not recording data properly. Not going to be of much use to David, which means he's not going to be of much use to us."

Roger didn't share her optimism that showing David concrete data to disprove his delusions would have produced much fruit. Yet there was no point in arguing the matter with her, particularly as the issue was moot, at least for the moment. Nor did he have much energy to worry over the scanner problem. Agnes could be counted on to address that and if she couldn't fix it then this problem, like the communication one, was apparently unfixable. Things really seemed to fall apart on the Cassini lately (including its crew). Roger was thankful that nothing catastrophic had gone wrong.

Roger spent most of his time looking over David, who generally remained semi-conscious, mumbling fitfully in his sleep. Roger found himself feeling sorry for his friend, who seemed so helpless strapped to a medical gurney. Roger noted that Richard had put a catheter in David, apparently as the psychotic man could not be trusted to be let up yet to use the bathroom. Roger took it upon himself to empty this and otherwise tend to David's comfort as best he could. Richard himself woke up after some time and joined them in the medical unit.

"Any improvement?" Richard asked, although there was little hope in his voice.

Roger shrugged, "He's been sleeping mostly. I guess that's an improvement over yesterday, at least he's calmer."

"That's the sedatives," Richard said conclusively, "hopefully they're having some effect beyond simply making him sleepy. If he doesn't return to an agitated state by tomorrow, perhaps we can let him return to his quarters and rest there; may be more comfortable for him than this."

David woke up only once while Rogers was with him. He and Richard were speaking quietly in the corner of the medical unit when at once they heard David whisper,

"Why aren't you there?"

At once the two men went to his side to check on him. He looked up at Richard with big sad eyes, still dropping from the sedatives, "Why aren't you there, Richard?" he asked.

Richard patted him gently, fatherly like on the shoulder, "What do you mean, David?" he asked patiently.

David's eyes languidly rolled over toward Roger, "You're there, and Agnes. I see you there, near me," they rolled back over to Richard, "but you're never there."

"I'm here now," Richard said kindly, but David's eyes had closed once again as he returned to sleep. Richard looked over to Roger and shrugged.

Later when Roger slept he had the dream again. He remembered it more vividly this time, because he was jolted awake by a commotion rather than allowed to awaken naturally. He had no time to reflect on his nightmare or to consider its origin, for now there were screams, David's and Richard's. David's voice was some powerful and primal monster of a scream, barely recognizable as human were it not for the familiar timbre of David's voice. Richard was clearly terrorized, shouting in fear. Something smashed, a weight hitting a surface so hard that Roger could feel it in the walls and floor of his room.

Roger's feet hit the floor at once and he was off, still shaking himself to full consciousness, moving in the

direction of the terrible sounds. Roger found it difficult, even under this situation to fully orient himself, to fully shake the sleep from his eyes. His steps were uncoordinated, his focus hazy, and it was only the injection of adrenaline that the screams had given him that kept him moving in their direction. He almost wondered at the reality of it all, if this were not some other form of nightmare.

He shook it off as best he could, moving in the direction of the medical unit. There he found Richard sprawled across the floor, battered and bruised and limp as an ill cared for doll. His neck, in particular, was terribly purple and Roger worried at once for his life. David was standing over him in a terrible rage, his eyes looking bloodshot and evil, his mannerisms those of a rabid dog rather than a human.

"David?" Roger said, foolishly, still trying to blink the last vestiges of slumber out of his eyes.

David looked up at him and, for a moment, paused, his eyes full of sorrow, "He wasn't there," he said helplessly, like a child, "You were there, asleep next to me. So was Agnes. They put things into us. They couldn't keep me asleep!" David pointed down at Richard's body, "He wasn't there! Why wasn't he there with the rest of us?" From the tone of his voice it was clear that David was pleading with him to understand. His paranoia had advanced to the point that Richard was now included in whatever conspiracy that David's mind had concocted. David knelt down next to Richard's prone form, reaching out once again for his neck.

For a moment, just a moment, Roger wondered how David had gotten free of the gurney and the restraints. Had Richard trusted him to return to his own room? There was not time enough to fully consider this, as David's intent for Richard was clear. Roger moved toward them, intent on pulling David away. David was up in a second, his reflexes like those of a snake. His hands met Roger's chest like two clubs and gripped the front of his shirt menacingly. Roger felt himself being swung through the air like a sack of sand, his feet leaving the ground, soaring wordlessly, until he felt his back and head connect with the metal bulkhead. David had lifted and thrown him with incredible ease, and now he came to rest, surprised and hurt into a disoriented bundle toward the back of the room. Roger rolled onto his side, trying to get up again, but found himself too weak and in pain from the collision with the wall. "David, no!" he shouted, hoarsely.

But David was leaning down once more toward Richard, now ignoring Roger. His intentions for Richard were clear, and there was little that Roger could do now in his present state. It was then that, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Agnes move into the doorway, herself looking as rumpled and newly awakened by this terror as he must. She had something in her hands which she now pointed in David's direction.

'Clunk', the thing in her hands made the sound like a sudden rush of compressed air, then again and again and again. David screamed out at the sound, tearing at his own clothes and waving his hands in the air as if to frighten off a horde of wasps. Still the sound came, clunk, clunk clunk. There were sprays of blood now, David's blood, misting in the air, settling in drops on the floor and on Richard who lay beneath David's flailing form. Roger could see Agnes better now, her face frozen in a mask of both horror and determination. He could see too the nail gun in her hands, normally useless as a weapon, but capable of driving the nails far into human flesh if two people were only a few feet away as David and Agnes now were.

David sunk to his knees, his hands desperately covering his face and head. Still Agnes fired and fired and fired, again and again, ten times, twenty. Roger felt paralyzed, helpless to say anything that might stop this horrid spectacle. After an eternity, a lifetime of torment that would be etched into his memory forever, David was still, and Agnes stopped firing the gun, though she kept it trained on David's still form. A pool of blood quietly encircled him, spreading out like a curse, soaking his clothes and spreading onto Richard, who still remained quiet and lifeless.

At last Roger was able to collect his own battered body and moved through the blood pool to Richard's side. He felt for Richard's pulse at his wrist and felt the air above his nose for breath. He was only slightly relieved to notice that both were present, for the bruising around Richard's neck told him that his injuries were severe.

"What in the name of Hell have I just done?" Agnes was mumbling, now looking as disoriented as if she were coming off a full night of heavy drinking. The nail gun was held listlessly at her side.

"Agnes, stay with me," Roger said, although he didn't feel much better than she looked. He felt nauseated, and still couldn't seem to shake off that sluggishness that had been with him since he awakened. His back hurt

badly where he had collided with the wall and his hands and knees were now slick with a mixture of David and Richard's blood. "Agnes, check to see if David is dead. Agnes, do you hear me? I need you to check David."

At least she seemed to hear him, and moved to check on the man she had just riddled with four inch nails. She touched his wrist, picking it up in her hands like it were a rotten fish. "Dead," she pronounced with a quiver in her voice that was indecipherable. Roger knew that she was in danger of going into shock.

"Agnes," he said, trying to get her to focus, "Richard is alive. I think that his neck is broken, we have to...move him..." As he said it, he knew the uselessness of his own suggestion. Richard's breath was coming in rasps and wheezes, his chest moving with erratic pauses. It seemed evident that all was not well with Richard's breathing, as if it were a great labor for him to accomplish it.

Agnes was not unwilling to point it out further, "And just where are we supposed to move him?" She pointed hysterically at Richard's motionless form with one hand, "Look at him, listen to how he's breathing. What are we supposed to do with him? He's the doctor, how are we going to help him?"

"I know!" Roger shouted at her, stopping her diatribe. She looked at him with wide eyes like a panicking horse, "I know that there's not much we can do, but we have to do something. We can't just stand around here and watch him die."

And so some minutes and hours passed in roughly that manner, with mixed indecision and hysterics on their part, while David lay dead and Richard lay motionless and with his labored breathing. Various ideas, each as untenable as the next, came and went. Aside from some futile attempts to make Richard more comfortable, little was accomplished.

At last, however, Richard opened his eyes and whispered to them in a sad voice, "Morphine...I need morphine."

Roger and Agnes were at his side at once, patting his hand gingerly, though they suspected he could not feel it. Richard looked at them with large, mournful eyes.

"Are you in pain?" Roger asked him, "Agnes, please get some morphine from one of the cabinets." At once she moved to them, eager for something useful to do.

Richard whispered, "Some pain, but I can't move. My neck is broken isn't it?"

Roger nodded, "Yes, we think so. Frankly we're not sure what to do to help you. We were afraid to move you out of fear of harming you more."

"You did the right thing," Richard responded, "There's nothing to be done. I'm a dead man. I need the morphine to make my death a quick and painless one."

Agnes stopped her search at his words and she and Roger looked at each other uncertainly. The request was not an entirely unexpected one. They all knew that Richard faced only death from his condition, likely from a blood clot, or from respiratory arrest as his labored breathing finally became unbearable. Either option would undoubtedly be quite painful. At the same time assisting in suicide, even under such clearly unique circumstances was illegal and arguably immoral. Agnes and Roger had no precedent to inform them how to handle Richard's request. The silence of their reaction clearly indicated their discomfort with the situation that presented them. It was equally unpalatable to help Richard kill himself as it was to force him to die slowly and painfully. Roger knew that ultimately the decision would be his, whether to agree to Richard's request.

Richard smiled sadly, noting their reaction, "You won't feel so badly about it when I tell you the things that I must. If this is to be my deathbed, I must render my confession."

Roger turned back toward him uneasily, a knife of ice stabbing down his spine. He suddenly felt that he had a bad notion of what Richard was going to say, "What do you mean a confession?"

Richard paused for a moment, sucking air into his lungs with great effort. The damage to his spine had likely caused problems with control over his diaphragm and intercostal muscle, making breathing difficult. At least he summoned with energy and breath to say, "David was right, in part at least."

Agnes turned around completely to face him, listening to him with rapt attention. In her hand she held the bottle of morphine that he had asked for. Her look was one of ever deepening shock, "What on Earth are you talking about, Richard? Little Green Men from Mars?"

"No," Richard said, solemnly, "just men,...from Earth. Another ship meets this one each evening at 0200 hours."

It was part of my duty to sedate each of you, to make sure that you didn't wake when they took you."

"Took us?" Agnes said, incredulously. Roger was too confused to offer a meaningful response or question.

"Yes," Richard continued, "After you were sedated, I was to wait in my quarters while they took you aboard their docked ship. They would return you at 0500 hours, promptly each day," he looked at Roger sadly, "It was all arranged before we left Earth. I was given my orders before we left."

"Orders? Who gave you these orders?" Agnes demanded, alarmed, yet clearly unsure whether to believe this story. Richard was clearly not raging psychotic that David had become, but it was clear that she hoped that his injuries might be the source of this unexpected confession.

"Department of Defense," Richard said, speaking as steadily as he could, given his poor breathing, "They assured me that you would not likely come to any harm, although...they appear to have been wrong. I don't know what they were doing to you, but whatever it was it decreased the effectiveness of the sedatives that I gave you. I think that's why David began to remember what happened to him on board the other ship."

Finally, Roger found his voice, "Richard, what you're saying is impossible. No manned ship has ever gotten out this far before. We're making history here."

"Officially, yes," Richard said with the same labored cadence, "but it's not true. There's been a ship out here waiting for us, faster and more powerful than the Cassini. The Cassini is old technology. As I said, the experiment that they are conducting was not expected to harm you, but if it did, it would hardly be expected for astronauts to die on such a long and perilous journey."

The callousness of that thinking froze Roger's blood. "Just what is it that you are saying that they have done to us?"

Richard regarded him quietly for a moment, "I honestly don't know," there was a silent moment between the three of them as that critical lack of information was left to sink in for all of them, "but there must have been some concern that what they were doing to you could have spread to other humans. I've thought on that many times during our journey. The Cassini is a perfect biolab. There's no risk of contamination of the human species."

Roger regarded him incredulously, "But, you would have exposed yourself if that was the case!"

"Yes," Richard agreed, "that was part of the bargain that I struck. I knew that I might die, but I was assured that my family would be taken care of for life in exchange for my sacrifice. And they knew I would follow orders, I did what my country, what my government asked."

"If that's so, then why tell us now?" Roger asked, still unsure whether to believe what he was hearing.

Richard paused again, "Because I honestly believed them when they said that you wouldn't be hurt. I don't want to die with that on my soul. I'm so sorry for what I have done to you, for my role in what ever injury has been caused to you. And for David's death, which also is my responsibility. I want to go to my maker knowing that I had done something, however small, to right the wrongs that I have done. And in my present state there is nothing left for me to do but to offer you the truth. I don't expect or deserve your forgiveness, but please know that I am sorry." A tear had formed on Richard's eye, a single glossy orb that collected near the duct, unable to move on Richard's horizontal face. It was this tear that convinced Roger that Richard was speaking the truth. Roger regarded Richard for some moments, starting into the other man's eyes, a man he had considered a colleague if not a friend, a man he had trusted as a fellow professional. He couldn't think yet, not yet, of the wider ramifications. A government that had lied to him, sent him into space to die. And for what? What experiment could be so valuable and dangerous as to send four people so far as Jupiter at great expense only to watch them die? Could it be some form of weapons program, or some variant of human bioengineering? The possibilities were both staggering and revolting. What could they have done to the crew of the Cassini, what were they carrying around in them now?

The dream that Roger had been having must have been real, recollections of his own experiences on that other ship. Was he too becoming like David? Was that the path that this experimentation was leading them to: madness and death? Roger's mind was having great difficulty adjusting itself to the full implications of what he was learning. The descent of his friend David into madness which had seemed such a catastrophe the day before was now revealed as the pittance of an introduction into sheer evil that it was.

Roger had nothing more to say and stood quietly. He turned to Agnes, who was shaking with rage but silent and told her, "Give him his morphine." He walked away, wanting some moments alone. He was confident that Agnes would comply with his request.

Roger wanted, no needed some time alone. He needed to reason through what Richard had said. Could it truly be possible that Richard's words were reality, that David hadn't been wrong about the abductions, only the nature of the abductors? Could the Department of Defense have truly built a ship more advanced than the Cassini, and sent it here to wait in ambush as the lesser Cassini made its circuit around Jupiter? If this were an experiment, than this clearly was an expensive one. What could possibly be so important and so dangerous as to require sending four astronauts into space to act as guinea pigs? It stood to reason that if this experiment were so dangerous that it could not be conducted on Earth, than the four of them were never intended to survive the voyage or make it back to their families. Whether they were going to die as the result of whatever had been inserted in them, or if they would be murdered in their sleep by other men, it didn't matter. Roger wasn't going to die like that. He didn't know if he could actually save himself, but he would certainly die with respect, he owed himself as much as that.

Agnes found him an hour later, still thinking. She had the nail gun with her. She stared at him for a long time before she finally said, "Do you believe what Richard said?" Her voice sounded hollow, as if her soul had been stolen from her.

Roger nodded slowly.

She watched him nod, her breath coming in steady rasps, her knuckles white on the handle of the nail gun. "So what t are we going to do?" she asked quietly.

He watched her fingers flexing on it tighter and tighter. Such pitiful weapons they had on board; a nail gun, torches, hammers, wrenches...what else? But what choice did they really have, "Next time they come to get us, we kill them," was his sad reply.

Those last few hours were tense beyond that which any person should have to endure. There remained the slightest hope that Richard's words might have been as false as they had believed David's to be. But that hope was a thin one, as each of them quietly believed that they had indeed been violated. Together, wordlessly, they waited in the pilot's room, watching the scanner, hoping to see empty space between them and Jupiter and beyond. The seconds ticked away desperately slowly toward 0200 hours.

A mere ten minutes before the allotted time a dot appeared on the scanner, miraculously moving out into open space from the cloud tops of Jupiter. This must have been what Richard watched each night, having safely sedated his crew members, preparing to remove himself from the scene as this other ship came to carry out its experiments. Roger was hit with a sense of unreality and dissociation. Part of his mind had still refused to believe what Richard had told them. Yet here was irrefutable proof on their scanner as the unidentified ship moved out of Jupiter's immediate sphere and quickly traveled for the Cassini. It was amazing to think that the government had somehow hidden this potential: a ship far faster and more powerful than the Cassini, capable apparently of hovering for extended periods of time in Jupiter's chaotic clouds and moving across massive distances with unheard of speed. But there it was, on screen, and it was coming for them, its malevolent intent still uncertain in their minds, but the malevolence was clear.

There was no question of avoiding the other ship. It was clearly the superior craft. Perhaps they might have made docking for the other craft difficult, but then what? Might the other ship have the means of destroying the Cassini? The only option they had, Roger and Agnes had agreed, was ambush. Assault the other crew as they came on board, kill them quickly, hope that there were not too many, and take control of the other craft. To say that this plan was ambitious was an understatement. Their weapons were rudimentary and short range. A single nail gun, a torch (which could burn through a space suit, but only at a foot distance or less) and wrenches to be used as clubs. Surprise was their only advantage. They would wait near the airlock, just on either side of the door, Agnes with the nail gun (as she had acquired some familiarity with its use) Roger with the torch. Quickly

kill the boarding crew and (assuming that went well) storm the docking craft and kill the piloting crew before they had a chance to respond. If the boarding crew had with them superior weaponry (just what they might have Roger could only guess) then they would replace their torch and nail gun with these. Otherwise they would have to make do.

"We don't have much time," Agnes said solemnly, looking at the screen.

Roger nodded, a muscle in his jaw twitching uncontrollably. He had never felt so nervous in his life. Ten minutes from now he could be dead, or back on an experimentation table. "Agnes," he said, "I'm sorry for all this..."

She silenced him with a hand on his arm, the look she gave him one of the kindest she had ever managed, "There's no way you could have known about all of this. Now, let's go."

They made their way to the airlock with no further words between them. There was space on either side of the airlock where a person could wait in ambush and not be immediately visible. If the boarding crew looked clearly to their left or right then they would be discovered, but Roger hoped that the boarding crew would be wearing protective suiting, thus obscuring their vision. Roger opened up the valve on his torch and lit the flame. The instrument made a constant hissing noise that worried Roger. Again, he hoped that protective clothing would be worn by the boarding crew, if indeed they were so concerned that their experiment might be infectious.

The few tense minutes they waited there seemed to stretch into hours. In truth, they hadn't long to wait until they could hear the other craft, or feel it more appropriately, as it came into contact with the Cassini, grinding and bumping it as it made contact and secured the docking structure. Roger could hear metal grating just outside the airlock. The ship that Roger thought shouldn't have existed just days before was now here, ready to board them. Roger's fingers tensed on his torch as he waited. He looked over at Agnes and could see the anxiety on her face as well.

At last the door to the airlock hissed open. Their moment had arrived. Roger waited, being patient, hoping that Agnes would be able to do the same. Their success depended upon timing, perfect timing. A single figure came into view, a shimmering image of silver in the general outline of a man. Roger felt a moment of hope, they were indeed wearing protective suits. The figure that moved past him was entirely covered in the silver suit so that it was impossible to tell if it were a man or a woman. Fortunately, the figure did not look either left or right, but continued deliberately ahead into the hall past the airlock. The figure carried some form of satchel over one shoulder and appeared to be dragging a wheeled gurney behind it. Naturally, Roger figured, the gurney was meant for one of them, to take them aboard their ship.

As the figure passed by them, Roger motioned silently with his fingers that that person should be the one Agnes would fire at, since the range of her weapon was better than his. She nodded in understanding, her face pale. Silently the figure padded down the hall, the wheels of the gurney squeaking a bit and rolling against the surface of the floor. There was no speech, no communication, no sounds, just the hissing of the torch and the squeak of the gurney wheels. The first figure silently moved further down the hall and a second figure, silver and silent as the first, came into view, pushing the back of the gurney. Roger didn't see visible weapons on either of them.

This was their moment; they would not have a better one. With a sharp nod of his head, Roger motioned to Agnes that it was time to strike. Then he launched out of his corner hiding place, triggering up the flame on the torch to its top setting. A six inch jet of blue flame emerged from this tip. Roger grabbed the rear figure's silver suit and the neck and jammed the tip of the torch against the side of the figure's head. Instantly the silver material beaded up and peeled aside and the flame burned through. Roger's fingers were being singed as bits of the material splattered onto them as it burned and melted. The figure remained silent, but let go of the gurney and raised its hands in an attempt to defend itself. The torch burned too quickly however, and within seconds the tip of the blue flame emerged from the other side of the silver material, having burned through both layers of the suit and the head protected within. The figure went down on its knees, no longer moving, then fell hard on its face. There was a smell like a combination of melted plastic and burning garbage in the hall. Roger wheeled back toward the airlock in case any other figures might be behind the first two, but it was dark and empty.

The first figure, its face obscured by a black face-plate, turned to face the threat. Agnes was already triggering her nail gun however, firing the nails at short range into the silver figure. The material proved to be no better

defense against the nails than against the torch. The figure raised its hands in a defensive gesture, but as she had done with David, she filled it with a dozen or more of the nails, until the figure came to rest, motionless on the floor.

Their plan, thus far, had worked to a remarkable degree and Roger felt a moment of elation. Perhaps they might manage to take control of the situation after all. Roger looked back at the airlock. The opening extended into the other craft, although there they could only see a plain hall moving left to right. On pegs hung more of the silver suits. Agnes moved at once into the airlock, her nail gun ready, keeping watch should anyone else appear. They had no way of knowing if any alarm had been raised, or the first two figures alerted the crew on board the ship in any way.

Roger looked over the fallen bodies, hoping to see some form of improved weaponry on them. The rear figure, whom he had dispatched with the torch didn't appear to be carrying anything. The front figure had been carrying that satchel however. Keeping the torch ready, Roger moved to that figure and bend down, opening the satchel. Inside there was a variety of metal tools of some sort, nothing that looked immediately like a weapon.

"Roger," Agnes said, testily, "We should keep moving while we have surprise." She was standing on the other side of the airlock now, in that left-right hall, watching anxiously to either side with her nail gun at the ready.

Roger was about to move to join her when he noticed the fluid seeping out of the wounds that the nail gun had caused the front figure. Out of each of the dozen or so holes in the silvery suit was oozing, not blood, but a thick yellow fluid that looked to have the texture of runny mucus. Roger stared at that fluid for a moment trying to make sense of it. Could it be something from the suit itself, some form of fluid insulation? But that didn't make sense, the suit seemed rather thin and he didn't detect any fluid texture from underneath its lining. The fluid could only be coming, like blood, from the person within the suit itself, the result of the wounds that Agnes had inflicted upon it.

A chill ran down Roger's spine. He remembered Richard's words, the conspiracy at the Department of Defense and his incredulity that a ship had been built on Earth secretly that could travel to Jupiter to wait for the Cassini. This he contrasted to David's words, which he had assumed to be delusional. Could it be possible, however, that Richard had only known part of the truth, that he has assumed the waiting ship to be piloted by humans. Could David have been correct in his perceptions of their abductors?

With trepidation, Roger reached out toward the hood of the silvery suit, with the black face-plate that covered the individual within from view. He had to see what they were dealing with, what it was that bled that mucus-like fluid. His fingers grasped and handful of the silvery material and with a single excited motion, he pulled the material away, exposing the head beneath.

What he saw then would be burned into his memory for however long he lived. The impression he got of what lay beyond the suit's hood was a tangle of thick, writhing worms, still moving as if trying to escape from the basic underlying form that they had been attached to. Exposed to the air they moved like a hundred tiny fingers, like maggots on a corpse, not a face, not human at all. There were no eyes, no mouth, just that vile, wriggling mass. Roger felt bile rising in his throat and immediately vomited what little contents his stomach contained into a pool beside the figure.

"Roger?" Agnes called, alarmed by his reaction, but unable to see what he had seen.

"Anges," he responded, still chocking, "Get back inside here..." but as he said it, the airlock doors on both sides slid suddenly shut, trapping her on the alien craft. David rushed to the door, past the two motionless figures on the ground, moving to the airlock, calling her name. The airlock would not open for him, and he could not see beyond it. He was still calling her name as he felt metal grinding against metal once more as the alien craft disengaged from the Cassini and moved off with Agnes in it, back into open space. Hours later he was still calling to her, but now there was only silence aside from the sound of his own sobbing.

Day after day and night after night, Roger watched the scanner onboard the Cassini, but the other ship never returned. He didn't expect it to, the experiment was over, ruined by their efforts. Whatever they had wanted with them, whatever the aliens had been doing to them, Roger still didn't know. What he did know was that his

efforts had ended in failure. He hadn't seen the danger early enough to save David, and he hadn't been able to keep Agnes safe either. He shuddered when he thought of her fate, what they must have done to her. It should have been him, he should have been there to help her defend herself from those things.

The bodies, if they could be really referred to as that, he had stored in the airlock, from which he had ejected the air so that they wouldn't rot. It had been hard unpleasant work; Roger had refused to look at the one face of worms that he had seen before in fear that they might still be writhing. He had placed David and Richard's bodies in there with them. It was not a fitting way to store human remains, but he had no other options.

Options were what Roger thought about now. The Cassini continued along its preprogrammed path around Jupiter as if nothing had happened. Communications were still down, but all else was functional. The alien spacecraft was gone, probably not to return. But what awaited him on Earth? If Richard's story was true, did this mean that the Department of Defense was in collusion with those...things...somehow? And to what purpose? And what fate would await him when he returned, knowing what he knew, having seen what he had seen, and the proof waiting in the Cassini's airlock?

He had time though, time to consider his options. With a year and a half before the Cassini returned to Earth, he should be able to think of something. That was, if he didn't go mad first from the loneliness.

The End.

CASE #70311

SOLITUDO

BY CHRISTOPHER J. FERGUSON



Details not released at this time



Lethargica

by Craig Meinhart

Physician: Dr. Peterson
8268-WCT29

#99151

CASE #: 99151



LETHARGICA

BY CRAIG MEINHART

LITTLE GEORGE ALDEN HUNG ONTO THE FRONT OF THE SHOPPING CART as he and his mother exited the Wal-Mart store. He hopped off just as they arrived at their aging Subaru, eager to help stuff bags of groceries into the back of the car. It was a grey day but he was feeling good; it was a school holiday. After helping mom run errands he'd have some quality video game time, and he was anxious to get to it.

Somewhere down the street came the screech of tires and the blaring of horns. George whipped around to see what was going on, the commotion signaling it was something major. A semi was plowing through cars sitting at a stoplight, smashing them like they were fragile toys. There was broken glass, twisted metal, and enough blood to see from far away. People in the lot gasped as the truck rolled to a stop.

"Did you see that?" George asked his mom. But even as he spoke the words he felt something funny, an exhaustion that made his limbs feel like they were full of lead. All at once his head swam in dreaminess, and when his mother came to him to see what was the matter he saw something terrible. The monster had eight eyes and a trunk for a nose and snakes for ears, and tried to eat his arms and legs.

"George, what's the matter?" she said as he screamed.

While a growing crowd of onlookers tended to the wreckage in the street, little George Alden fell asleep on

his feet and tumbled to the ground, giving his head a solid knock. Moments later, while trying to get him up, his mother fell asleep on top of him.

There were others, of course. The little mining town in Eastern Missouri made the state's evening news. Suddenly people began to talk about the place where an increasing number of people were randomly falling asleep. Some of the stories inspired laughter, like the man who passed out on the shitter at work. Others brought on gasps, like the baby that died when its mother fell asleep while giving it a bath.

People started calling Dawkins Sleepy Hollow. In a place where that description was fitting on a normal day, it became a moniker of deadly seriousness. Outsiders stayed away, and locals with the means to leave did so. The town became a modern day spook story just as it was about to become important to the future of the country.

He booted up the laptop that had been provided by an emissary from the Jupiter Corporation. His middle seat was uncomfortable; the plane was packed. He wore headphones so those around him couldn't hear the video message that popped up. Onscreen, a bald man in a conservative black suit sat in front of a digital background that displayed Jupiter's colorful yet tasteful logo and spoke directly into the camera.

"We've had word that ABC News is going to do a story about Dawkins. A big one. Other networks are waiting to see if something more interesting happens, but they'll be ready if it does. We need to know if this deal can go through. Head down there and find out what's going on, report everything back to me. You'll meet with a man named Nigel Davos. You have a week before the story comes out."

Tobias Griffith finished the video then safely put away the laptop. The flight from New York was delayed, oversold, and loud with children, so he was in little mood to face a car ride into back country at its end. Luckily, his contact Nigel was waiting for him at the baggage claim, greeting him with a warm smile and a firm handshake.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Davos," Tobias said, stifling a yawn. Air travel always made him tired.

"Nigel, please. Nice to meet you as well. I already have a rental car secured. We can be on our way as soon as you're ready."

"Assuming they haven't lost my luggage."

The airline hadn't lost the bags, but it did take the better part of an hour to retrieve them. While they waited they did introductions, getting formalities out of the way. Nigel lived in Chicago, was married, had one teenage daughter, and seemed genuinely excited to get to work. Tobias was from Brooklyn but currently lived in Manhattan, was single, and had a black cat called Schrodinger. His book and vinyl collections were extensive, as was his knowledge of craft beers. And he loathed leaving the city, but knew a good career opportunity when he saw one.

Dawkins was an hour and a half southwest of St. Louis. Nigel drove the white Camry and had the radio tuned to the lone classical station. Once they got away from the city it faded to static. Tobias spent the drive jonesing for a cigarette, but knew he couldn't smoke in the rental.

"What's your background?" Nigel asked.

"I was a research geochemist with the U.S. Geological Survey," Tobias said. "I sifted through dust samples in the aftermath of nine eleven to determine what in the particulate matter might affect first responders."

"That makes perfect sense."

"How so?"

"I was Chair of Medical Sciences and Biotechnology at the Center for Naval Warfare Studies at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island before I gave it up so the wife and kids could be closer to her family in Chicago. I spent a lot of time studying dust particles in Iraq and Kuwait."

“And?”

“Myself and the other researchers found that up to a thousand dust particles can sit on the head of a pin, and the stuff we gathered contained thirty seven metals including aluminum, lead, manganese, strontium, and tin. The metals have been linked to neurological disorders, cancer, respiratory ailments, depression, and heart disease.”

“Sounds a lot like what I found,” Tobias said.

“Exactly. Hungry?” Nigel asked. “I can stop if you need a bite to eat.”

“Starving, actually. Could really use some noodles. Been craving Vietnamese.”

“You might be out of luck with that one,” Nigel said, laughing.

It was a straight shot down interstate 44. They passed through Eureka, Pacific, and St. Clair, the drive taking them through a heartland filled with rolling hills, trees, and open highway. Tobias succumbed to his hunger and got a Wendy’s salad, which he mostly threw away after picking out the protein.

“Where first?” Tobias asked.

“I took it upon myself to contact the local doctor of the boy in the report. I thought we might gather some information from him before checking in to our hotel.”

“That’s fine with me.”

It was an easy ride. All that open space invited a resting of the heart and head.

Dr. Paul Perch’s office was a small but clean suite located in a mostly abandoned strip of office fronts. His niece was the receptionist; a fair girl with glasses and a ponytail. She greeted the two men promptly, a little bell above the door tinkling as they entered.

“Good afternoon,” she said. “Paul is expecting you. His office is just to your right.”

Dr. Perch was a large man in both height and width. He wore casual clothes, khakis, and a plaid shirt rolled up to the elbows. Mounted on the wall behind his desk, above his educational bona fides, was a perch with a miniature stethoscope on a plaque that read: THE DOCTOR IS IN.

“Gentlemen,” he said, offering each a rough handshake. “What can I do you for?”

Paul was a loud and gregarious individual, the kind with a booming laugh that let itself loose after a few drinks. But Tobias detected a mistrusting glint in the way he looked over his out of town visitors.

“Like I said in our previous phone conversation, I was hoping for a little more insight into the boy George Alden. It’s been my understanding that he and his mother are regular patients of yours,” Nigel said.

“That’s true,” Paul said cautiously. “I’ve known Dottie and her husband George Sr. for years, and little George since the day he was born.”

Tobias jotted notes in a pocket notebook as the two men chatted, scribbling in herky-jerky shorthand only he could really understand.

“Could you describe in detail the boy’s symptoms of sickness?” Nigel asked.

“Same as everybody else, I suppose. But then again, each case is a little different than the last. Isn’t that what’s so troublesome about the whole thing? Little George fell asleep in the Wal-Mart parking lot, helping Dottie load the groceries into the car. He hit his head on the pavement, but luckily that was nothing serious. Then Dottie passed out on top of him. It was one of the workers out collecting carts that came to help them. George Sr. was called once they’d been taken to the hospital, and he called me from there.”

“Dottie woke up after four days with a wicked hangover, and she didn’t remember a thing. Little George woke up after a week, screamed *monsters*, then passed out again for another ten days. Scared his poor parents to death.”

“And you’ve seen George Jr. since, yes?”

“Been treating him for acute anxiety. You believe that? A nine year old boy. It’s a helluva thing.”

“Have there been others that have had hallucinations?”

“Sure. Twelve year old Sue Dobson passed out for five days, laid her head down on her desk at school and went right to sleep. When she came to she said she’d seen flying horses on fire and strange lights coming from trees.”

“So it’s been mostly children having the visions?” Nigel asked.

"Not all, no. Mary Wintrock went under twice and said she was visited by her dead husband each time, but he had a stranger's voice. She's going on ninety. And Dean Delilo was sure he'd been abducted by aliens before he swallowed a bullet to keep it from happening again. He was only thirty nine."

A silence fell over the room, only broken by Tobias' scribbling. Paul was intently staring the men over, searching for something only he knew. "Maybe now you'd like to answer some of my questions."

Nigel and Tobias waited for the query.

"What exactly are you doing here?"

"We're gathering research on the four separate events that have occurred in your town that affected sixty percent of its population over the course of the last year. Any help in the matter is most appreciated."

"Who sent you?"

"We are here in the service of your interests, Dr. Perch. We want to help."

"I did some research of my own, and the way I figure it, you're either government henchmen or you work for the Jupiter Corporation. So which is it?"

"Would it matter?"

"Not really."

"I see," Nigel said, standing up. Tobias put away his pad and followed suit. "Here's my card. If you can think of anything else, please let me know."

"I think you know the way out."

His sleep the first night in Dawkins was unrestful and furtive, putting Tobias in an ever worsening mood. What was worse, the two men were forced to share a room at the Comfort Inn. Multi-billion dollar international conglomerate or not, Jupiter was solidifying its reputation for being cheap.

They ate breakfast at a family diner across the street from the hotel. The coffee was terrible and the food inedible. Unless one viewed grease as an essential food group, Tobias mused.

"Excuse me, ma'am," Nigel said to their middle aged waitress.

"Need more coffee?" she asked.

"No, just a word. Do you have any friends or family that have suffered from this sleeping sickness that's going around?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"I'm a doctor of sorts, and my friend here is a scientist, and we're trying to figure out why it keeps happening. Any information you can pass along is greatly appreciated," he said with a smile.

"What kind of doctor are you? I've been having these problems with my back, it's like a dull pain that gets worse throughout the day."

"Not that kind of doctor," he explained patiently. "You'll want to see your general practitioner for that, stay away from chiropractors. I'm more the kind that studies the human brain and how it works."

"Never heard of no brain doctor before."

"I'm sure you haven't," he said, placing a twenty dollar bill on the table. "Are you sure you don't know anything useful?"

She took the money and slipped it into the front of her apron, then looked around as if she was about to divulge state secrets.

"It got me about two months back," she said.

"Do tell."

Tobias whipped out his notepad and began scribbling.

"Passed right out making my son pancakes. Lucky I didn't burn the place down."

"Did you have any warning signs before it happened? Headache, nausea, or drowsiness?"

"I was tired, but I figured it was because I work all the time. Luckily my Jonathan's a smart boy and called for help. I was only out for two days, but that was enough I'll tell you."

"And what was it like?" Nigel asked, sipping his coffee.

"Just sleep. But it stays with you after, makes your head all cloudy and gets you worried it'll happen again. I heard some folks are out for a long time, and some never wake up. Is that true?"

"There have been deaths, yes."

"Some have said it's got something to do with the mine opening back up. It's gone and poisoned the water or something."

Nigel just smiled back, refusing to either confirm or deny her suspicion.

"I better get back to work. You sure you're good on your coffee?"

"Do you think that was wise?" Tobias asked as they drove away from the diner. "She's bound to talk about us now."

"Dawkins has less than five thousand residents. It has one major industry, mining, and that only recently reopened after being shuttered for more than a decade. People were going to gossip about us anyway. At least now we can claim we have nothing to hide."

"But you lied about who we are."

"Well, we might have something to hide," Nigel said.

Tobias thought about it then nodded in agreement. Their next stop was the Green Ridge Mine itself.

It was a harsh, muddy place with rusted mills, storage sheds, and a marshy lake filled with mine tailings. Mining had made many impressive advances over the years, but one thing remained constant—it was a hard life. The place looked severe, uninviting.

Bobby Johnson sat behind his metal desk in his plain office, leafing through a mound of paperwork. Bobby was Green Ridge's ostensible owner, at least until the buyout from Jupiter went through. He looked more special forces and less investment banker, though he was both in his former life. The door to the office was propped open by a large hunk of rock, and when Nigel and Tobias approached they were quickly waved in.

"Can you believe that?" Bobby asked, pointing to the rock they sidestepped. "Nobody bothered to tell me what that was when I bought this dump. They were literally using it just like that. I keep it that way as a reminder."

"What is it?" Nigel asked.

There was a smaller version on the desk. With dramatic flair Bobby held a small magnet up to it, and it stuck.

"The reason we're here, it's a rare earth element. Magnetite specifically. This place used to mine high-grade iron ore. I had no idea what I was sitting on until I started sifting through the books," he said, pointing at the jam packed file cabinets. Papers were littered everywhere, some having slipped to the floor. It was a neat-freak's nightmare. "They were throwing that shit away before. I still have mounds of paperwork to sort through to learn everything that's in the deposit."

"Have you sent copies to Jupiter yet?" Tobias asked, breaking his silence.

"As much as I could, but I'm only one man and this shit requires a team. To be honest, I was hoping that's what you guys were here for."

"You're somewhat correct," Nigel said. "We are here to collect data."

"And?" Bobby asked.

"And try to figure out why Dawkins Missouri is suffering from a most unusual problem."

"Ah, that."

"Yes, that."

"And you're worried the mine might have something to do with it."

"I have no worries at all," Nigel said with a grin. "I'm only here to report my findings."

"Of course."

"How many of your employees have suffered from the sickness?"

"Which time?"

"In total."

"Hard to say. Turnover's been a little high, but easily half. Maybe more."

"Can we access your employee records?"

Bobby responded with a shrug that implied he was none too pleased about it. He was the king of this castle, and bristled at the ease with which these gentlemen subtly demanded information. Of course, that came with the territory in this potential buyout, and he knew it. It was all a game, and Bobby hated gamesmanship.

"Have you suffered from the sickness?" Nigel asked.

"No, knock on wood," he responded, rapping on the desk. "I had a scare a few months back when my girlfriend got the flu and was run down all the time. We were both afraid she'd pass out like we heard some others did. But she pulled out of it."

"That's good to hear."

"It's a hell of a disease."

"We don't know what it is yet," Nigel said.

"The government seems to think they do."

"Local and state representatives have now tried three times to investigate and pinpoint exactly what has caused these occurrences, and each time the findings have been inconclusive. That's part of the reason we're here. It is hoped that our expertise may help find a cause to go along with the effect."

"Expertise?" Bobby said.

"Might we have a tour of the facilities?" Tobias asked.

Bobby brightened at this. Though he was suspicious of the men in his office, he was unabashedly enthusiastic about his mine. After donning protective gear they walked the premises, Bobby quick with the details of the mine and its possibilities.

"The U.S. is almost totally reliant on China for rare earths, which are used to make solar panels, lasers, guided missiles, batteries for hybrid cars; hell really any futuristic technology, including the smart phone in your pocket. But China's slashed its exports while promising new regulations and raising prices, pissing off our government in the process. Green Ridge is our chance to strike back."

Bobby led them to the core room, a metal shed with row after row of lockers that looked like oversized safe boxes from a bank. Stuffed within each lock box were stacks of long, thin cardboard boxes. The boxes held sections of samples taken when the mine was first developed, each of them one inch in diameter cylindrical rocks.

"The original owner was Jordan Steel. Back in the sixties they only cared about iron." He pulled out a broken piece and held his small magnet up to it, grinning when it stuck. "Magnetite. Just like in my office." He grabbed a different broken piece and pointed out the glinting yellowish speckles. "Rare earth oxides."

Next they trudged over to the mile long, hundred foot deep lake of tailings, a slurry-like waste product of almost forty years of iron mining.

"Right now we're strictly mining the lake's twenty-two million tons of waste. If Jupiter decides they want to buy me out, they could start underground mining in less than a year."

As they looked upon the toxic lake and its black water, a cold wind whipped up small waves. It cast a deathly pall over an already desolate place. Around them were corrosive leftovers and ramshackle buildings and not much else besides the trees, and even they were lifeless.

"Do you think we'd be able to talk to some of your workers?" Nigel asked.

"Knock yourself out, but we're running a skeleton crew at the moment."

They did quick interviews with six different men in a cold, grey room whose sole decoration was a wall calendar featuring hot rods and bikini models. Nigel did the questioning and Tobias scribbled his notes. Of the six, three had previously fallen victim to the sleeping sickness, and the other three personally knew of someone who had. One had a vision of dying that was disturbing to him, one felt nothing other than sleep, and the third was beset by headaches and nausea before and after. All were afraid it could affect them at any time.

Back at the Comfort Inn, with the local news on in the background, Tobias entered his days' notes into his

laptop. He typed away while Nigel talked to his wife on his phone. It had been a long day and they were both tired, but there was still much to do.

“What did we learn today?” Nigel asked, putting down his phone.

“Besides useless facts we already knew?”

“Not entirely worthless, I’d argue. We have to cast a wide net and document as much as we can. But besides that, I find it very interesting that the rates of sickness amongst the mine’s workers are about the same as the general population’s.”

“Perhaps,” Tobias said. “But it may be a little early to say so definitively. Our records of the mine’s workforce are incomplete. More importantly, I want to sort through some of Mr. Johnson’s files. We still don’t know everything that’s in that tailings pond.”

“True,” Nigel conceded. “But I think we’re on the right track.”

Tobias didn’t think there was any track to be found yet, that they were just grasping at straws like blind men. But he kept that to himself. After entering all pertinent data into a secured file and sending off some encrypted emails, he passed out with the TV still on.

Their days were spent busily collecting all the information they could, from as many different sources as possible. At times, it seemed random to Tobias. Nigel, on the other hand, was always chipper and ready to work. They studied soil and water samples, sections of mining core, visited city councilmen, the mayor, the sanitation department, the police force, the local hospital, and spent a good amount of time at the library.

Dawkins was in a curious position. A town twenty years behind the times, it was at the forefront at the battle for the future. Currently there were no victims of the sleeping sickness, but everyone was grimly convinced it would return like a thief in the night. Overall crime was down, but depression and anxiety were high. The elderly feared getting buried alive after falling asleep, only to awaken in the grave. Parents feared calamity for their families, while children feared the vicious dreams that sometimes came with the sleep. Not everyone feared the same thing, but everyone feared something.

Along with the general malaise conspiracy theories ran wild. More than a few were convinced it all had to do with the recently opened mine, and that they were being poisoned. Others thought it was a government job, that they were the next version of the Tuskegee Airmen. A few whispered it was the doings of the Chinese, or the Jupiter Corporation itself, though none had been able to point out how Jupiter would profit from poisoning a town. There were whispers of alien infections (did you see the meteor shower the week before this all started?), and even tinpot religious speculations. Jesus was testing their faith, and the devil was persecuting them all that the same time.

Then the eye of the storm passed and the sickness began again. This time it happened to an outsider.

He stood in a long, dark tunnel with a gentle downward slope; a main artery of the Green Ridge Mine. Behind him, the last light of day was fading fast. In front of him, just barely visible, was the shape of a man. He was facing away, muttering something. He approached the stranger with a mixture of confusion and fear, but somehow knew it was important to hear his words.

The air was cool and damp and stale, heavy in his lungs. He’d glance back at the daylight just to make sure it was there. The man in front didn’t answer his call, just stood stark still and whispered his words. There was something terrible about this apparition, but Tobias was compelled to see his face. He edged closer and closer, the darkness now swallowing him completely. He stretched out a trembling hand to touch the stranger’s shoulder, still trying to decipher what in the hell he was saying.

“Sleep...”

Tobias opened his eyes as Nigel jostled him by the shoulders. Immediately he was worried. The room’s curtain was partially open and he could see it was still nighttime, but he felt lethargic and dimwitted.

“You gave me a scare,” Nigel said, offering a glass of water. “How are you feeling?”

Tobias was in a daze, and it took him a minute to gather his thoughts. Something unfinished stuck in his mind, but he couldn't decipher what it was.

"Like I went on a bender. How long was I out?"

"Two days."

"Are you serious?" Tobias asked, shocked.

"Do you remember anything?"

"No, the last thing I remember was inspecting the mine and uploading my notes before going to sleep."

Nigel nodded but added nothing. Tobias tried to revive himself with a hot shower and a bite to eat, but he wasn't very hungry. As he picked at his sandwich he watched the TV while Nigel excused himself to make a call.

Dawkins made the regional news again when a policeman fell asleep behind the wheel of his cruiser and caused a three car accident by running a red light at a four way intersection. No one died, but a female passenger in another car had her knee shattered. A responding paramedic passed out loading her into the back of the ambulance, sending her tumbling to the pavement. Onlookers rushed to help.

Tobias watched the reporter on the grainy TV in the cramped room, nursing a sleep hangover. There was already town chatter about strange visitors asking questions about their hardships, and now the sickness was back. He knew the outcome wouldn't be good.

The broadcast on channel eight practically shut the town down. Schools closed their doors and overwhelmed parents had to use whatever sick days they had from work to babysit. An already on-edge populace was hostile to outsiders and even their own kind. The local hospital was filled to overflowing with frightened patients seeking medical refuge where none could be found. Then a trauma surgeon passed out on top of a gun shooting victim and that place too turned into a graveyard. No one was safe.

Tobias left the hotel room to get some air. It had been a day since he'd awoken and he felt better but still not quite right. He'd watched the news stories and Twitter feeds raptly, trying to make sense of it all. Nigel seemed to be watching him closely, which made sense, but still made him uneasy. He was now on the outside looking in, or was it the other way around?

It was early afternoon on a Monday and the streets were empty. Even the hotel maid service had stopped coming around. Tobias made the two block walk up to the Quick Trip gas station to get some caffeine and cigarettes, coming only across one middle-aged woman who gave him a wide berth and refused to make eye contact.

At the pumps were two cars filling up, both of them loaded up like dust bowl travelers on the way to someplace better. Inside the station a single cashier eyed him warily as he mulled his options. Mostly Tobias drank gourmet coffee and herbal tea, but drastic times called for drastic measures. He settled for a sugar-free Red Bull.

"How are things?" Tobias asked.

The black woman behind the register slid his change across the counter to him and said nothing in reply.

On the walk back to the hotel he saw a momentary flash of the man from the mine in the window of a car parked on the side of the street. It was the out of the corner of his eye, the kind of thing that was over before his brain could register it. But it was eerily familiar, and it brought on a headache.

"Things are progressing as expected," Tobias heard Nigel saying. When he entered the room the man snapped his laptop shut and flashed a quick smile. "How are things out there?"

"A ghost town," Tobias said.

"Splendid. That will mean less interference for us."

"To do what?" Tobias asked.

"To go back to the mine."

The Green Ridge Mine was shuttered and stood before them as a tombstone for a dying town. Nigel parked the Camry in front of the main office and dug a pair of camcorders out of a bag on the backseat.

"What are these for?" Tobias asked after being handed one.

"Jupiter wants video of as much of the mine as we can get."

"No one told me that."

Nigel said nothing to that.

"Does Bobby Johnson know about this?" Tobias asked.

"He fell asleep not long after you did, and he's still not awake."

"How do you know that?"

"I'd been trying to contact him while you were out. When I most recently tried to call he didn't answer, so I drove out to his house and met his girlfriend. She was in a panic, and I helped take him to the hospital."

"Are they still taking people in?"

"Jupiter pulled some strings."

"I bet."

"Let's get to it."

Tobias knew what they were doing was strictly illegal, but there was no one around to stop them. In all likelihood they could firebomb the place and only the Jupiter Corporation would care. Nigel carried his camcorder and some oversized bolt cutters, just in case things were shut tight. As it turned out, they didn't really need them.

Bobby's office was wide open. Tobias recorded the room with his camera, careful to include the magnetite doorstep, while Nigel opened the file cabinets and rattled off the tabs.

"Core samples, '61 to '69. Iron deposit logs 12201 to 12400. Directory of employee..."

They walked the grounds as the sun began to set, painting the Midwest sky with orange and violet strokes. The twin camera eyes recorded every step, capturing the majority of the complex on a frigid winter day. Tobias shivered to himself; this was the last place he wanted to be.

"You want to go get the tailings pond while I go check the mine entrance?" Nigel asked. Tobias didn't answer, but Nigel still took that as acceptance and went off to do his thing.

Tobias trained his camera on the black pond as shadows stretched across its monolithic surface. The mine was surrounded by tree lined rolling hills that blocked the day's last light. There was a slight breeze, just enough to cut through his light coat and chill his bones. As he pulled the zoom back into a wide shot he saw strange rippling out in the water.

He approached. In the epicenter was a drowning man churning the deadly still waters in a violent frenzy. Tobias lowered the viewfinder and it was gone. The black pond's glassy top had returned.

He bent over the edge of land to get a better look down into its depths and he saw a vague form trapped in frozen animation. His eyes grew heavy and his limbs very weak even as he felt the panic inside surge. It was a disorienting sensation, a psychic speedball playing topsy-turvy with his psyche. Without being able to stop he tumbled face first into the toxic sludge. Like a dinosaur ensnared in a tar pit he was helpless to struggle free. He fell slowly down until his body convulsed for air, forcing a mouthful of black ichor inside him.

Tobias stood on the edge of the bank bone dry, shuddering as he snapped out of his trance. He almost did stumble into the manmade pond when he lost his footing, but he righted himself and scurried away from its edge. Spooked, he hurried to catch up to Nigel. When he arrived at the mouth of the mine he saw the darkened outline of the man in its depths. He was muttering something to himself. What, he couldn't tell, and when he called out he got no reply.

The light from the camcorder was easily overwhelmed by the darkness. Tobias edged forward, recording as he went. Dread made his hand tremor as he reached out to grab his partner's shoulder. But before he could touch him a voice called from behind, and he twisted around in surprise.

"Are you ok?" Nigel asked from the mouth of the tunnel.

Tobias turned back and saw nothing but darkness in front of him and heard the merest whisper of words. The video he'd recorded was blank. "What the hell?" he huffed as he ran out.

"I've been calling after you since before you went in. It looked like you were sleepwalking."

"You were never in the mine?"

"What would I be doing in there? Come on, let's get out of this place," Nigel said.

"Don't fall asleep," a voice rang softly in his ears. But he was already asleep. Or was he? It was getting harder and harder to tell. The voice sounded like his own but it had the strange dissonance of coming through an ancient phone line. "Don't fall asleep."

Tobias sat up in bed. Across the room Nigel was softly snoring. The television had been left on so Tobias flipped through the channels but found nothing of interest. He booted his laptop and started scrolling through his progress reports, looking for anything to tie the mysteries of the sleeping sickness together.

Reams of data fluttered across the screen. He saw iron ore deposits and pictures of mosquitos and medical case files and pages upon pages of research papers. Some of them were written by him, but he hardly recognized them. After a while he stopped trying to make sense of any of it and let the images wash over his retinas in a kaleidoscopic display.

There was a ping from his messenger service. When he clicked on the icon the face of a Jupiter employee appeared on the screen. It belonged to Mason Monroe, the bald headed, glasses wearing man. Tobias still wasn't sure of his exact role in the company, but he was still in his suit and tie deep into the night, and looked as if his face never cracked a smile.

"Hello, Tobias," Mason said. "What have we learned so far?"

"Nothing conclusive."

"Are you sure about that?"

The screen changed to an image of himself asleep in bed. Shortly thereafter he awoke to Nigel shaking him awake.

They were in the car with Nigel behind the wheel. Tobias was awake but his head felt foggy.

"Sorry if I was a little rough waking you up," Nigel apologized. "I was worried you might not wake up."

"How long was I out?"

"Just a few hours, but you were pretty unresponsive."

Tobias' head lulled forward drunkenly. "Where are we going?"

"To interview the Aldens," Nigel said, keeping one eye on the road and the other on Tobias. "It seems little George has fallen under again."

"How do you know that?"

"I kept harassing Dr. Perch for any new info and he finally caved," Nigel said with a smile.

Tobias closed his eyes for just a second, and the next thing he knew they were stopped in front of a small white house with shuttered windows and toys on the front porch.

"I told them we were shooting a documentary about the town. I figured that might get them to open up a little bit," Nigel said as he broke out the cameras. Tobias seemed not to hear him. "Maybe you should sit this one out."

"I'm fine," Tobias said. He grabbed his camera and followed Nigel to the door.

After a knock on the door there were introductions and pleasantries exchanged. George Sr. was a gruff bear of a man, wearing several days stubble and the thousand yard stare of someone that hadn't had sleep in a very long time. Dottie had puffy red eyes from crying, and padded around the house in sweat pants and an oversized t-shirt.

Tobias kept the camcorder running while Nigel did his thing, getting the married couple to open up in front of the camera. They were obviously distraught over little George's condition, but showed the men around their modest home anyway.

"I apologize about the state of things," Dottie said. "I've been so worried about Georgie, I haven't cleaned much lately."

"Say no more about that," Nigel said comfortingly. "There's more important things than the laundry, right? May we peek in and see George?"

He was in his room, buried under a mound of covers. His bed had a race car frame and matching blankets, while Nascar posters covered the walls. Dottie bent to stroke the boy's brown hair while Tobias stood in the doorway with the camera, the red recording light shining.

"How long has he been this way?" Nigel asked.

"About three days," George Sr. said somberly.

"Can you describe what happened?"

"He seemed better after the first time. Then about five days ago he complained about headaches and wasn't eating much. He'd get real dizzy on his feet, would sway around and lose his balance. We were already worried cause of what happened before."

"And you, Dottie, have you felt any of these symptoms?" Nigel asked.

She was staring intently at her son, watching his chest rise and fall with each breath. A tear rolled down her cheek. "We should leave him be," she said.

Nigel looked into the camera and shrugged as they left the boy's room. George Sr. offered coffee and a bite to eat, but Nigel politely declined. Dottie's manner had changed; she was staring at Tobias with something like anger as he recorded them.

"Some government researchers came to your home after the first outbreak, correct?" Nigel asked.

"Yeah."

"And what did they investigate?"

"They said they were checking for radiation or radon or something like that," George Sr. said. "But they weren't real talkative and I don't think they found anything. They brought some funny sounding machine in here to measure the air or some such, but it never really twitched."

"I think it's time for you to go," Dottie said.

"Of course," Nigel said.

"You have to understand," George Sr. said escorting them out, "we'd hoped to have a large family, but Jr's been our only blessing. If anything happened to him..." He trailed off, lost in thought.

Tobias had to brace himself against the door for a moment, the world around him growing dim for a moment.

"Thank you for your time," Nigel said, shaking the man's hand. "I'm sure your son will be fine."

"I see even visitors to our town are touched by its curse," George Sr. said grimly.

There was a ritualistic element to their process of investigation that Tobias found increasingly fascinating and frightening. He was never in control of the proceedings, and it seemed as if completing the tasks was of monumental importance even if the findings were inconsequential. Paranoia was now a constant. Was he asleep or awake? Could Nigel be trusted? Could he? A few times he'd awoken and found Nigel talking to someone on his phone and he'd immediately stop as soon as he realized he wasn't alone. And then the next day he'd have their plan of action all mapped out, with him in the lead and Tobias as tagalong.

Tobias never protested, but one day he did decide to swipe Nigel's laptop while the man was sleeping. It took a good amount of planning and bit more of luck. He pulled it off, silently snagging the machine from the man's bag by his nightstand. But it yielded no results; everything was encrypted and password protected. Then inspiration struck: if Tobias couldn't access anything, then neither should Nigel.

He hid the laptop under his own mattress. The next morning Nigel said nothing about it, but it was obvious he was desperate to find it. His usual sense of ease was gone.

"Time's running out," Tobias said. "What's the plan for today?"

"Why are you asking me? You could come up with something for once."

It was inordinately hard to find time apart. It was only when Nigel went to the bathroom that Tobias took the opportunity to slip out.

"Just going to get some smokes," he called out.

He grabbed the laptop and hurried out. He slipped to the dumpster around back of the hotel and cast a wary

look around before chucking it into the massive green bin. To waste some time he strolled up the empty street and back again. Streetlights were on but otherwise the place was a ghost town. No traffic drove by and no pedestrians were out. It was still relatively early, just past 9pm, but it felt infinitely later. And yet, programmed by life in a much larger city, he still waited for the light to change before he crossed the street.

He returned from his ethereal stroll through Sleepy Hollow and found Nigel typing away on his laptop as if nothing had happened.

“Feeling better? You were muttering something in your sleep.”

He looked down and found himself in bed. Trying to conceal his surprise, Tobias nodded and mumbled something even he couldn’t understand. In a land where sleep brought more clarity than wakefulness, he found it harder and harder to tell if he was the rabbit or the hole. And then he awoke.

“Radiation levels throughout the mine are increased, but not to a dangerous level. Thorium has been detected in the groundwater supplies as well, and may provide some insight into the sleeping sickness. The young and elderly seem particularly susceptible to the sickness, showing the strongest symptoms of decreased motor control, dizziness, headaches, and hallucinations. But even otherwise healthy adults have fallen ill, bringing life in this small town to a standstill. The current outbreak of sickness, the fifth such event in eighteen months, is the strongest yet and shows no signs of abating.”

“Preliminary diagnosis of the sick has turned out to be incorrect or only partially true. This particular strand of sleeping sickness is quite different from meningitis and narcolepsy, and is spread by unseen factors, unlike types contracted in Africa by exposure to the tsetse fly.”

“Diffuse brain edema has been found in some but not all children, and there seems to be no link between edema and hallucinations. All other data has proved inconclusive.”

Tobias heard himself saying the words, but his mind was a million miles away. Mason Monroe nodded along with the presentation and added nothing at its end. He simply logged off and the transmission ended. Tobias closed his laptop and rubbed his temples; his head was throbbing.

Nigel came back to the room with two cups of coffee. “Here,” he said, handing one over. “I thought you could use one.”

“Thanks.”

“One of the perks of being healthy in a hot zone is there’s no wait at the coffee machine. How are you feeling?”

“Good,” Tobias lied.

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

“Great. Cause I feel great. I think we’ve got this one in the bag.”

“How do you mean?”

“We’re obviously dealing with mass hysteria, don’t you think?”

Tobias was unsure how to respond; was he being tested, or did Nigel really think that?

“Mass hysteria typically begins during periods of stress; if this town isn’t depressed I don’t know what is. Other symptoms include nausea, muscle weakness, and headaches. Sound familiar? Why else do you think it hasn’t spread beyond Dawkins?” Nigel asked.

“Tainted water supplies, increased radiation from the mine, poisoning; everything we’ve been testing for, and you think it’s in everybody’s minds?” Tobias asked back.

“Is it so crazy to think so? You and I both know this has nothing to do with encephalitis lethargica or hypanosomiasis. In Sri Lanka not too long ago, almost two thousand school children were taken to hospitals because of skin rashes, vomiting, vertigo, and coughing. Fifteen schools were closed down while authorities tested for food, water, and air poisoning, and they found nothing. Back in 2012 in New York there was some news about kids developing Tourettes, but the place tested negative for toxins. These stories are not unheard of.”

“What I experienced wasn’t a hallucination,” Tobias said. “What if it’s all real and we’re discovering some new

terrible disease? What if we simply lack the understanding to reckon with what we're studying? What if it spreads and we can't stop it? Everyone always imagines apocalyptic scenarios of flu and Ebola and Marburg. But what if our species ends because we just stop taking care of ourselves and drift to sleep?"

"You're an overworked, underpaid stranger in a strange place studying strange phenomena. I've passed out for less," Nigel said with a good humored laugh and a pat on the shoulder. "Take heart, we'll get you out of here and back home in no time."

Tobias once had a dream that he was a man with a purpose. He'd done well in school, had advanced quickly through academia, earned plaudits, and had made a difference in the world around him. Before his trip to Dawkins his confidence in himself and his future had been as solid as the ground beneath his feet. But once he dreamed he was a man asleep he couldn't tell when the dream ended or began. This wisdom felt like madness.

It was their last day there; their flight left St. Louis at two in the afternoon the next day. Determined to stay awake he worked fiendishly through the night on his own presentation he would give to the press. He tried every trick in the book to keep awake: coffee, tea, Red Bull, jumping jacks, cold water in the face, and slapping his cheeks. He was typing away, talking to himself in a delirium. All the while Nigel slept soundly.

"They're not going to believe this shit. High voltage in the ground. Hallucinations brought on by extremely low frequency radio waves in the ten to twenty hertz range. Radon gas from the mine. Carbon monoxide seeping out of the ground..."

He awoke face down on his laptop. Nigel was gone, and wouldn't answer his phone. It was dusk, and when he checked online it was now three days after his flight was supposed to leave. He flipped on the TV and checked the news. He saw a serious looking female reporter in a sharp suit standing in front of the Dawkins Medical Center.

"The residents of this small Missouri town have been the victims of a bizarre sleeping sickness brought on by mass hysteria. What began as a freak occurrence spread quickly throughout the populace, triggering an event that saw the closing of schools, work, and even the hospital behind me."

And then a familiar face appeared on screen. It was Nigel, looking respectable and speaking with authority. The rolling ticker beneath him called him a sleeping sickness expert, and when he spoke Tobias stared at the screen in stunned silence.

"We don't want to be insensitive to the plight of these people, their suffering is real. It's just not a disease or a sickness in the physical sense. What they are afflicted with is poverty and a lack of hope. But that's exactly why opening the mine will be the best thing for them..."

Tobias turned the set off before Nigel could finish. He gathered his things and left the hotel. He didn't bother to check out, there was no point. He drove down the middle of the street to the gas station, where the cashier was passed out behind the counter. Tobias grabbed some caffeine and cigarettes and took off, hoping he could make it to the next town without running out of gas.

Cars were strewn about the road like a child's discarded toys. Some were abandoned, some had drivers asleep behind the wheel. He threaded through the wreckage of the lost civilization, even seeing people asleep in the road. As he drove down the lifeless highway his mind drifted to the mine tunnel and the man inside it, and he felt the dawn of epiphany tickling the back of his skull. The highway and the mine had merged in unison, the twin eyes of his wakeful mind and his sleeping one seeing as one. The closer he got to the stranger the more he dreaded discovering what he already knew. That it was himself he'd been chasing, and his life had been nothing more than a dream. Thankfully, his eyelids had grown heavy, and the road had become choked with fellow dreamers. Deliverance, like death, had come with the sleep.

The End.

CASE #99151

LETHARGICA

BY CRAIG MEINHART



I have previously been published in Schlock! Webzine, Micro Horror, and DM DU JOUR. I am also the singer/lyricist in the metal band Silvertonguedevil, and shoot and edit short movies and music videos. I live and work in Dallas Texas.



Where Do I Go

by CR Brooks

Physician: Dr. Lotherton
8715-AED19

#86927

CASE #: 86927



WHERE DO I GO

BY CR BROOKS

Sometimes I scare myself

The way I look at me

The way I talk to me

The way I talk back

Sometimes I worry myself

The way I act

The way I don't care

When I catch myself

Sometimes I go places

And see people

And they can see me
And I hurt them
And they can hurt me
And I get confused
And worried
And I watch myself
Scared

Where do I go?
I know it's dark
And there's black
And their faces
Are shapeless
And tall and
I can feel
That I'm not breathing
And they can tell
And they laugh
And they watch me
And I watch myself
But none of us help
We just laugh
At me

My laugh turns more
To a cackle
And they cackle along
Though I can't see their mouths
But I can feel mine
And I can see mine
Cowering as I laugh
At myself

Sometimes we hurt me
We stone me
Like we're angry villagers
And they continue laughing
But I stop laughing

And I watch myself bleed
And I can almost feel it
And I can almost taste
The blood as a stone
Collides with my jaw

I stop laughing and
I try to step away
But they won't stop till they see me
Walking away
And they see me cowering again
As I watch myself cower
And then they're all looking at me
Even myself stops cowering
And starts watching me
And we're laughing again
But this time I'm not laughing
But they're laughing with me
At myself

Sometimes I go places
And I wish I didn't go anywhere
And I try not to go
Because I can't stand their laughing
Or my laughing
So now I cower and try not to
Laugh at all

CASE #86927

WHERE DO I GO

BY CR BROOKS



Colin Brooks is a Weird fiction author and poet currently residing in Northampton, Massachusetts, USA. His influences are the likes of Thomas Ligotti and Algernon Blackwood. He has been previously published in Sanitarium Magazine, as well as the Muddy River Poetry Review. He is currently working on a collection of weird poetry.



Pier Paolo Pasolini
Takes Me to Hell

by Justin Holliday

Physician: Dr. Lichten
6428-SED41

#73759

CASE #: 73759



PIER PAOLO PASOLINI TAKES ME TO HELL

BY JUSTIN HOLLIDAY

When he grabs my hand,
his wet palm sticks to mine; it's phantasmagorical
how lifelines meet like two crescent moons
to blot out any light between us.
I make it sound romantic so I don't wonder
how a man can stand with worms crawling
from his mouth after four decades underground;
he doesn't have much to say,
I don't ask questions, just feel
my hand moisten. When he tugs on my arm,
we move and don't stop/don't stop down

we go and my fingernails click
against the concrete wall
like an experimental poem
overburdened with slashes.
I concentrate on his body, try to imagine
all of the places the dirt is plastered:
behind his ear, in the crook of his elbows—
could it be between his toes?
The only constant is his sunglasses.
I assure myself that they're there
though I can't see a goddamned thing.
I rely on his grip, the belief that he will never know
that at 23 I still hadn't read Dante or his own poetry,
the belief that he prefers younger men; like me—please
do not be disgusted with my sexuality.
And remember *Arabian Nights*, not flagellation.
I pray you do not take me
to a room of fascist dicks,
burying everyone in bullets and shit.
I confess: I have not read the books
your films are based on.
I confess: I do not know what it feels like
when a car crushes a body. Even as you take me
farther down in the dark,
I will let you guide me, unwilling/unable
to solve the mystery of the tire tracks
on your chest that Kathy Acker traces
and pries open with her pen
in *My Death My Life* by Pier Paolo Pasolini.
You were her ghost lost in the pages,
allusive/elusive, woven with Shakespeare,
but she's dead. And you've come for me
to be here and hold my hand at your side.
When you reach the last step,
you turn a doorknob
I can't see; only a pair of binoculars

on a black pedestal sits in the dim room.

Look, you say, and I see the dirt resting
in the stitching between thumb and forefinger
as you hold up the binoculars.

Through the lenses I see myself
as with crooked teeth and bulging tongue
admiring the torture of innocence/innocents,
bodies burning as if literalizing the fire in my cock,
hardly feeling you break the hand
you never let go of.

CASE #73759

**PIER PAOLO PASOLINI TAKES ME TO HELL
BY JUSTIN HOLLIDAY**



Justin Holliday is from South Carolina and teaches English. His work has appeared in *HelloHorror*, *Leaves of Ink*, *Up the Staircase*, and elsewhere.



On the.

Record



TALES TO TERRIFY

So tell us a little bit about how Tales to Terrify got started. Where did the idea come from?

Well the show is actually the brain child of Tony C. Smith and the late Larry Santoro. Tony is the President of the District Of Wonders, which started out as a Sci-Fi series and evolved into multiple shows across all genres. Tony approached Larry many several years ago to be the voice of the show. Larry took it and ran! Our first episode only had five downloads, and we now have an audience of over five thousand. We unfortunately lost Larry last year to cancer. There was some debate at the time whether we could keep the show going, but the consensus was that Larry wouldn't want the show to shut down, so we do the best we can to honor his memory and keep the show going.

It looks like you all run a pretty packed podcast schedule! How do you decide what segments to air and when?

Right now we're dealing with a huge back log of stories, and with a few time-sensitive exceptions work on a first-in, first-out method. It's only in the last month or so we've been able to catch up with stories that Larry himself approved for airing, and he's been gone for a year now... As far as accepting stories for publication, we're currently closed to new submissions, just so we can catch up. But, like most other podcasts, we look for quality of writing, how well the story would translate into a single-narrator audio version (meaning we don't do full-cast productions, we like to keep things simple on the show.) Being a horror show, we look for things that address the deeper, baser emotions of the human condition. Our vampires don't usually sparkle, and things can get rather disturbing, but the strongest stories don't drown in gore either, it's all about discovering the human nature. Horror in literature is

unique pathway to discovering those things about ourselves.

With Halloween approaching, I assume you all are gearing up for a busy season. Do you do any sort of seasonal themes?

We've just wrapped up a series featuring the top five nominees for the annual Bram Stoker awards. For Halloween this year, we'll be celebrating our 200th episode. We did a poll with our listeners and will be having a throw-back Halloween special series. We're going to be having productions from Poe, Bierce, and Harvey. These public domain pieces are some of our editing team's favorites and the inspiration for many horror writers out there now.

How does horror, as a genre, differ when audibly told? What sorts of reactions do you hear from viewers that differentiate them from reviews of novels or short stories?

Well, I can't speak for everyone, but I've always found the spoken word more engaging. Imagination is a wonderful thing, and as a reader I'm allowed to enter into the author's imagination, but with a narration, not only do we see that imagination, but the narrator adds their interpretation to the work. I think of Audio as salt to the story. Done well, it makes the story last longer and taste better.

Does the offering of horror in audio draw a bigger or different crowd than blogs or magazines? Do you see any differences in demographics (age, etc.) for your audience?

It definitely draws a different kind of crowd, particularly people with not a lot of time on their hands. People who don't feel like they have time to read or browse blogs tend to find other ways to get their fix. That's actually how I got into podcasting. I have over an hour commute every day, and it was a great way to pass the time during the drive. Listening to these stories is a way to engage your mind without giving up the ability to act. I know people who do their house chores while listening to a story, or spend their lunch hour listening to a book. As far as demographics go, it tends to be busy people of all walks of life, though we don't really track those statistics.

How has the site evolved over the years?

Well, I've only been with the show for about a year now, and we've already changed a lot. The show began as a labor of love by a theater director. When Larry died, the show was flipped, but we worked very hard to keep the spirit of the show alive. We've only recently begun adding author interviews, and there's a few other projects in the works. I can't really talk about them yet, but cool things are coming!

Do you think this genre tends to draw more men than women overall? And are you seeing a change in that as social media and accessibility to authors and narrators of both genders are able to get their work out there?

Well, arguably, Mary Shelley was one of the great horror writers, and most agree that she was the pioneer

of modern science fiction. In fact, our sister show Star Ship Sofa recently hosted a look back in genre history with Amy H. Sturgis detailing how Shelley got her start and is a fantastic example of women in genre fiction. It's been my experience that Horror has a universal appeal in some form or another. Most people say horror and immediately think of axe-wielding psychos or possessed little girls. Horror as a whole is simply a genre which has a focus on the basest human emotion. Science fiction is look to future, Romance is a look to relationships, Horror at its heart makes us look at the scariest place of all; ourselves.

Who is the best guest you've ever had on Tales to Terrify and why? Can you imply who is the worst guest you've ever had? We won't tell!

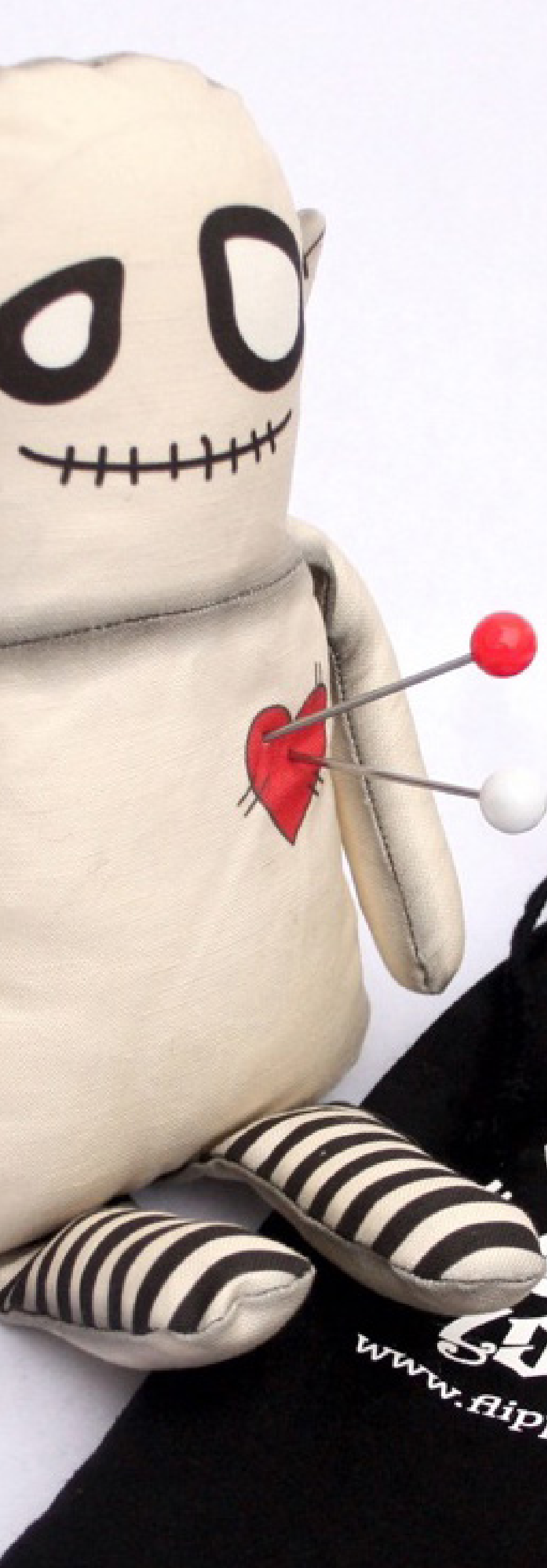
We've only recently started hosting guests. Sylvia Shults has a running engagement of her show Lights Out! with us and brings awesome real life experiences to our little cabin. Recently we had an interview with the Amazon Best Selling Author Michaelbrent Collings. It was an utter pleasure to work with him. I can't say we've ever had a bad guest, we're definitely very lucky there.

How would you encourage authors to get into audible books/narrations of their stories? Do you think their stories are best narrated by the author, or a voice actor?

ABSOLUTELY, audio production has become so much easier and cheaper now, it just makes sense. Not only are you appealing to a much larger audience, but as an author selling your audio book is a huge way to boost your sales. As far as WHO reads the story, it depends on the author. There are some authors who have a great voice and equipment, they're able to really bring their story alive. Specifically I'm thinking of the Ministry of Peculiar Occurrences series with Tee Moris and Phillipa Ballentine, or Mur Lafferty's series, or Scott Sigler. These are people who have very unique voices and lend it to their work expertly. Some authors have beautiful stories but can't convey it orally, which is nothing to be ashamed of. Actually, Audible has a great exchange program for pairing authors with voice actors.

And finally, how can we tell our readers where to find you, what's coming up and how they can add to Tales to Terrify?

Well the easiest way to catch all our work is to head over to <http://talestoterrify.com> and listen. You can also listen to us in the iTunes podcast store. We've just wrapped up the Stoker Awards short fiction winners and are currently gearing up for our 200th Episode special. We'll be running a series of classic (public domain) short stories and it should be incredibly fun. As for ways to help, rating us on iTunes and liking on Facebook are a great way to show your support, as well going to the District of Wonders Network and donating to keep the show going. Every show in the district is labor of love, but unfortunately servers don't run on love alone, so anything helps. We recently had a scare that funding was getting so low, we were in danger of shutting the show down. We've had a fairly successful pledge drive but definitely want to encourage everyone to support the work we do.



FLIPPING ZOMBIES

So tell us a little bit about your business! What do you do?

Flipping Zombies are digitally printed cloth dolls that are normal people until they flip inside out to become brain-hungry bloody Zombies. They are designed, printed and made in the UK by a strange girl with an unnerving love for all things Zombie!

Why were you interested in coming and being a part of Bristol Horror Con?

All the great zombie events that I have been to seem to happen up north so I'd love to support events like this in the hope that we'll get more quality events like this a bit closer to home.

What types of marketing strategies do you use to get yourself out there in this arena? What makes you stand out?

I enjoy making custom zombies for people I admire in the horror genre. I've made and sent dolls to Norman Reedus (Daryl Dixon from The Walking Dead), Colin from Bristol Horror con sponsor Zombie Business, Simon Pegg and Nick Frost. I also presented one in person to horror/fantasy author Neil Gaiman. I get a massive kick out of getting a response from these guys and couldn't stop grinning all week when I got a personal message from Norman Reedus thanking me for his doll.

I have plans to make personalised dolls for Bruce Campbell, George Romero and Alan Moore.

What's the one thing you're most looking forward to at Bristol Horror Con?

I've dabbled a bit in my own zombie make-up but I love to see the results when the professionals are let loose so I can't wait to see the work of Alice Bizarre and Jodie Gibson (SFX make-up artists)

Is there anyone that you're hoping to connect with? Any authors or outlets that you have your eye on?

I'm hoping to get some cool booty from Screaming Demons and Cherry Black Boutique. I'll add to my comic book collection with some new stuff from Hellbound Media and there is a blank spot on my wall that is crying out for an illustration by Wolfskulljack.

What types of clients do you generally attract? What do you have to show them at the con?

Strangely enough, Flipping Zombies seem to be the gift of choice for romantic occasions, I create custom effigies for people and they mostly seem to be ordered for weddings, anniversaries and valentines presents. I'll have a bunch of my zombies at the con and I'm also planning to bring along some of my horror themed paintings, artwork and prints.

Have you attended any other cons this year, or are there others you are planning to attend later on in the year?

In October last year I made it to Scardiff (as a guest, not a trader) it was an excellent event with lots of great traders and some excellent costumes. My brother, his girlfriend and I won the costume competition dressed as zombie versions of the Brady sisters and Jack from The Shining!

I'll be shambling through the streets of London on World Zombie Day for the St.Mungos Zombie Walk. It's such a great event where everyone gets really into the dressing up, this year I'm putting together a costume so I can dress as a zombie version of Death from Neil Gaiman's Sandman graphic novels.

How do you plan to expand your business in the next year?

I left my job in the real world to go freelance as a graphic designer this year so hopefully it's going to be a big year for me!

Flipping Zombies is a hobby business which I run alongside my design business www.candyjoyce.co.uk

Tell us: do you know Sanitarium? If so, what do you think? If not, want to know a little more?

Yeah, please add me to the mailing list!

Do you want to be featured in an upcoming issue and you are attending a horror con soon? Let us know and we will be in touch.

editor@sanitariummagazine.com



A CLASSIC CASE OF LYCANTHROPY

Nate Norman - Producer.
Alexander Buie - Writer & Director

What first triggered your interest in making short horror films? Is this the only type you produce or have you made forays into other genres?

ALEX: The Twilight Zone would be the biggest inspiration for making short films. Each episode was so excellent and unique and in such a brief amount of time the episodes were able to leave a huge impression on my psyche. Horror may be our first genre, but the plan is to explore others as well.

NATE: Film is life, love and religion for me and I have always loved the horror genre. I was 3 years old when I started watching shows like "Night of the Living Dead" with my dad and older brother and my fascination with the occult grew from then on. I have written scripts for a few other genres but the next few projects for me will stick fairly close to this type of movie.

What were your first steps in the film making world? What is your best piece of advice for aspiring filmmakers out there?

ALEX: I started acting first. It gave me a chance to study what went on behind the scenes like a fly on the wall. My advice for getting started in film is to just start doing it. Study the films you love, get a camera and practice making movies!

NATE: I think the best advice for any type of aspiring artist has already been given by the man himself. Stephen King said that a lot of people sit around and wait for inspiration before writing and the rest of us, the successful ones just go to work. That is paraphrasing of course but that applies with everything. Jump in and get dirty and it will either be a great learning experience for future projects or inspiration will come through the work.

Are you content (for the moment, at least) making short films, or is this a spring board from which you hope to launch a career in full length feature movies?

ALEX: Short films are only the beginning. My team and I are planning on making full feature films in the future. Short films and music videos are perfect for the moment because they aren't as gigantic and overwhelming as feature films. It's like giving a steak to an infant, we can't handle it till we get our teeth.

NATE: If all I did for the rest of my life was make short films I would be a happy man. However, I am far too ambitious to stop there. I hope to have a graphic novel and feature film completed in the next 3-4 years. And short films are a great way to stay busy in between.

Do you think horror lends itself better to short films than other genres? What about it makes those few minutes so suspenseful for the audience?

ALEX: People love a good scare, and in those few minutes it's easier to set the table for a terrifying scene, build tension and deliver suspense!

NATE: In a word, Yes. I think a large part of what makes Horror so fascinating is the enigma's we don't understand about the paranormal, creatures from beyond or what fuels a homicidal maniac. Uncertainties fuel fear, and to be honest it is much easier to write or produce a 15-20 minute story arc and leave that sense of uncertainty at the end than in a feature. If you invest 2 hours getting lost in a story you want explanations or at least a piece of the mystery. I think where a lot of filmmakers go wrong is giving bullshit explanations at the end of a movie so the viewer doesn't feel cheated. Crazy shit happens and we don't always have answers for it and I think our movies should reflect that reality.

When you're conceptualizing the look and feel of A Classic Case of Lycanthropy, did you start with the script and let that lead you? Or did the setting sometimes influence the script?



A CLASSIC CASE OF LYCANTHROPY!

CONCEPT ART

KEVIN



ALEX: The look and feel came to me as I was writing the script. It's as if the story and the characters already existed and all I had to do was watch and listen.

NATE: For me it was Alex's first draft that has driven the concept to what it has become. After I read it he came over and we talked about it for a few hours and what we could do with it and anything that I have added to this project has stemmed from his original draft.

What makes short films more challenging than feature length movies? And what makes it easier?

ALEX: Short films are like an appetizer and easier to handle with smaller budgets. Full lengths usually require bigger teams and the like but you have more time to flesh out the story.

NATE: I think that the answer to both questions is the same thing and it is the timing. When making a short you get to take the 3 act structure and shrink it down which can be fun (not to mention a lot easier when doing later drafts) but it is so easy to add more and more until you almost have a feature. So you have to find a good balance.

How long is the average production time for a short film? Are actors and crew more eager to work on short films?

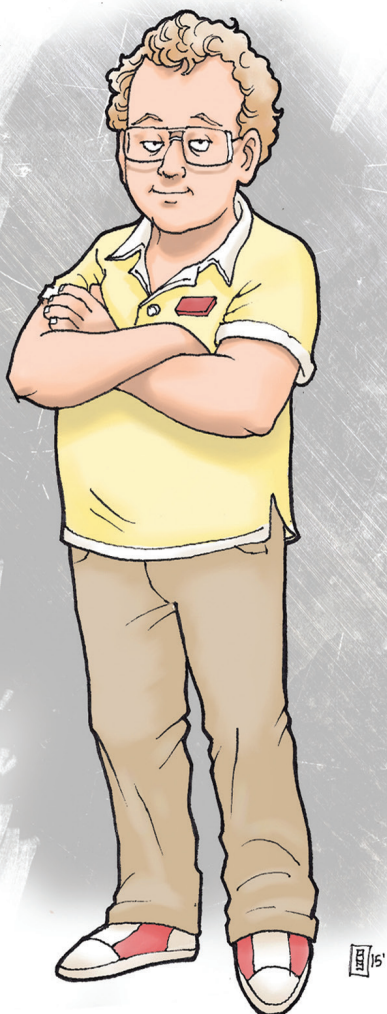
ALEX: A short film usually takes a week to shoot depending on the complexity of the story and the variety of locations. I feel actors and crew are more inclined to work on a great story with compelling characters. The length doesn't matter as much.

NATE: The production time will vary from project to project depending on how many locations and actors you have. The intricacy of your shots and any special effects the film may or may not have. I don't know if the cast and crew are more eager to work on a short more than a feature but it is definitely easier to fit into everyone's schedules.

Even though "short" is in the title, what kind of impact do you think a short film can have on an audience? How do you pack so much into such a small length of time?

ALEX: Like any story, the potential to carry an impact is immense! When it comes to the decision of what to put into the short with such a small amount of time, you have to learn sacrifice the bits of story you know it can live without.

LUCAS



5/15

NATE: Shorts are a huge jumping off point for a lot of people. You can make one or five and have a variety to show someone and say “Look at what I have done, this is what I want to do next and we need your money” and that way your next investor knows what they are getting into which will be good as long as you do good work.

What is the best (and worst) short film you’ve ever seen? Have they inspired your work?

ALEX: That’s a tough question! There have been some fantastic short films, too many to sort through and I try to forget the bad ones I’ve seen!

NATE: One of my favorite short films is “Dirt”. A dark comedy about a guy talking a girl out of suicide while burying her dad. I really appreciate dark humor but I would say it has helped fuel my love for that sort of entertainment more than inspiring it entirely. I have seen a lot of bad movies and a lot of bad short films. I won’t name any but if the filmmakers are proud and they are able to get their vision across to at least one person who enjoys it then I would say that’s a success. Especially if the movie is bad enough to be on someone’s “worst” list.

Outside of directing / filmmaking, what do you do to pass the time? Do you have hobbies outside of film/horror that you like to take the time to enjoy?

ALEX: I’m a professional artist. I love drawing strange things, creatures, and people that I see which also helps with making movies. The two go hand in hand!

NATE: I have a beautiful wife that I try and give a lot of my time to but other than that I really love to read, write and travel. But mostly my hobbies involve film in one way or another so I consume a lot of movies and TV Shows when I can.

How much is left on the cutting room floor in post-production of your short films?

ALEX: It varies, but I believe what winds up getting cut isn’t sorely missed in the end.

NATE: If we do our job right then not a lot. If we do a great job in pre-production and during principal photography it makes the editing process go by much quicker and easier because we aren’t fighting with ourselves about what needs to be cut or left in the final product.

To what do you attribute the recent renewed interest in the classic horror characters of Vampires, werewolves and zombies?

ALEX: Though I try, I can’t remember a time that when there wasn’t a classic monster movie out!

NATE: Aside from a lack of creativity I think a big reason zombies have become a phenomenon is The Walking Dead. It made the Zombie topic more accessible to all types of people because it isn’t just gore and horror it is the human condition in a dystopian future. But as long as we are here, Vampires, Zombies and Werewolves will be too.

Are there many venues where you can showcase your work, or do you rely heavily on the internet for exposure?

ALEX: The internet is the best place for exposure, but the real goal is getting a short film into festivals, and there are many festivals.

NATE: I believe there is locally. Community theatre, local television and movie theatres. But in this day and age if you aren't using the internet at least a little then you are cheating yourself out of an incredible amount of exposure.

Does having a limited amount of funding restrict the scope of your work, or does it just encourage you to come up with inventive ways to make a small budget stretch a long way? Have you ever had to scupper a project due to lack of financial backing?

ALEX: Getting funds for a film can be the toughest part, but I've never had to scrap a project. Where there's a will there is a way! I love the challenge and creativity that arise from having a low budget. Looking back on certain films, they had to use more creativity due to a lack of CGI, and delivered some of the most memorable scenes because of it.

NATE: I don't think we would ever let that happen with any project. If we had financial issues we would either take the time to get what we needed for the film or we would just finish it on our own. We both have experience doing various jobs on set and we would just make it work. It would be a lot more hectic but it would be worth it once we had the finished product.

Can you tell us a little about the A Classic Case of Lycanthropy project that you are currently working on?

ALEX: Classic is a horror story with laughs. It's about a guy named Kevin, a horror movie enthusiast and hypochondriac that believes he is experiencing the early stages of becoming a Werewolf. We plan on filming soon!

NATE: "A Classic Case of Lycanthropy" is about a young horror movie fanatic (Kevin) who notices he is starting to go through the first symptoms of becoming a werewolf. I can tell you that it will be different than anything else that has been done in the genre and will be a lot of fun from beginning to end.

Thank you for taking the time to talk to us, and good luck for the future.

Thank you!



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